

*Family Values: The Bible and Sibling Rivalry*

Genesis 25, Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Whitefish UMC

July 13, 2008

- † “Nobody can imagine what sisters Venus and Serena Williams were going through as they prepared to face each other in their third all-in-the family Wimbledon final last Saturday afternoon.” So said the “Miami Herald” sports page last weekend, in a story echoed by hundreds of other sports writers.
- † Of course the stakes were high: title to the most prestigious tennis championship in the world, a lot of money, and bragging rights. Most of us have never been in that kind of competition with our brothers or sisters.
- † But most of us do know more than we might care to admit about sibling rivalry. And although we’re not competing for a world tennis title, we do compete throughout our lives with our siblings for our parents’ attention, and for, well, our birthright.
- † And we are not alone. It’s a story as old as the hills, as old as our first ancestors in the faith. In today’s Old Testament lesson we return to the story of Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah. Isaac has survived a close call at Mt. Moriah, where his father Abraham nearly kills him until God intervenes.
- † Isaac grows to adulthood, meets the beautiful Rebekah, falls in love with her, and marries her. For a long time Rebekah fails to conceive, but the couple’s prayers are answered and she becomes pregnant with twins.

- † Rebekah experiences a difficult pregnancy—so difficult that she laments to God—“If it is to be like this, why should I live?” The turmoil in her womb foreshadows the conflict between her twin sons, who are born in competition with one another—Esau first, with Jacob gripping his brother’s heel as if to pull him back.
- † Esau is the firstborn son, with rights of inheritance. And he is the more attractive of the boys, an outdoorsman, a hunter, his father Isaac’s favorite. Jacob, the story says, is a quiet man who stays home in the tent, his mother’s favorite. He is also very smart. He and his mother turn out to be among the best schemers and manipulators in history.
- † One day Esau comes home tired and hungry from a day of hunting, and he discovers his brother, Jacob, making a stew. It smells delicious. “What do I have to do to get a bowl of that stew?” he asks Jacob.
- † Jacob, sensing an opportunity to secure his future and gain more favor, shrewdly answers, “Give me your birthright—your right of inheritance and our father’s blessing.” For some reason, Esau agrees. This is someone who apparently doesn’t have the skill of delayed gratification.
- † Esau also isn’t too careful with words, while Jacob is. Jacob makes sure that Esau swears an oath of assent to what turns out to be a monumental agreement. Jacob understood that words don’t necessarily have to be spoken with thoughtfulness or sincerity to have a significant effect.
- † Words, then, in and of themselves, are extremely powerful. The Gospel of John reminds us that “in the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life, and life was the light of all people.”

- † Although we usually read these words at Christmastime, it’s important to remember them in July, too. And remember that it is in the beginning of the book of Genesis that God speaks creation into being. Think of “God called the light Day, and darkness...Night.” By God’s word were created land and sky and sea out of the formless void.
- † God spoke into being vegetation, animals, sun, moon, stars, and finally humankind. God created them, male and female, in God’s image. We are created in God’s image, male and female.
- † And therefore, within our words, lies the very power of creation. As Sarah Buteux says so poetically, “That same breath that set the universe in motion, brought time into being, and animated our earth flows in and out of us, minute by minute, and it is immensely powerful.”
- † Words are indeed powerful—more powerful than Venus’ serve or Serena’s backhand. Words are also like seeds. Jesus’ Parable of the Sower affects us so deeply because our beings are like the soil. In the parable, Jesus talks about the life expectancy of the “words of the kingdom,” which are seeds of truth.
- † But all words, whether or not they are true, have the potential to lodge in us and grow, just as seeds have the potential to lodge and grow in the earth.
- † Take a minute to think about how the words of family and friends affected you as you were growing up—particularly the words of your

- siblings. If you were fortunate, you had parents and sisters and brothers who encouraged and supported you with their words and their actions.
- † You grew strong and courageous and confident if you had that kind of background. But none of us grew up in a perfectly supportive family, and many of us had sisters and brothers and parents who loved us but could also at times be cruel and thoughtless.
  - † You know the old saying, “You always hurt the ones you love,” and that’s especially true when we don’t think about the impact our words can have. Sometimes we speak out of our own pain, wounding others so we won’t feel so alone.
  - † Words have the power to hurt or to heal, and we can’t underestimate their impact. Words, whether they are good and true or evil and false, can lodge deep within our consciousness and grow to become a part of us.
  - † My eyes sting and my stomach lurches to remember some things said in anger by my sister to me. And I know she felt the same. Now that she is gone, having died five years ago now, I wish I could take back some of the things I said out of the pain I felt over my own loss of identity when I was around her.
  - † And I also wish I could have released some of her hurtful words instead of cultivating, watering, and nurturing them in my reservoir of anger and resentment toward her. You see, I felt she had stolen my birthright, in effect—my place in value and affection.
  - † What if I had taken those words and let them blow away into the wind like so many dandelion seeds? But we are human, and some of those seeds of pain do take root in us.

- † There's a film out on DVD now called "Margot at the Wedding." It stars Nicole Kidman, Jack Black, and Jennifer Jason Leigh. Margot takes her young son out to visit her sister Pauline, who is getting married to Malcolm. It's clear from the start that there is a tumultuous past between the two sisters, though Margot insists she has moved on.
- † Margot doesn't approve of her sister's choice in husbands, and as soon as they get back to Pauline's house, all the old wounds emerge. The sisters play off each other's neuroses—knowing their weak spots, histories, and "hot-buttons."
- † Margot belittles her sister and even occasionally her son, searing them with verbal cruelty, only to tell them minutes later how much she loves them. Chaos ensues, with relationships in the family lying shattered in the wreckage.
- † "Margot at the Wedding" is not for the faint of heart. In fact it's rather dark and depressing, although really well-acted and complex. For some of us, it hits a little too close to home.
- † Where, then, is the hope for those of us who still struggle with painful relationships in our families or with those we love?
- † We return to the scriptures for clues. Let's go back to the story of the competitive twins, Jacob and Esau. Isaac is near the end of his life; he's old, doesn't get around much, is nearly blind. It's time to do the blessing that will confer inheritance rights on his eldest son, so Isaac plans a little celebration.
- † He tells Esau to go hunting and make him his favorite stew (who knew a stew could be so powerful?!), and they will sit down and eat and drink together and the blessing will be conveyed. Rebekah and

- Jacob then pull off an appalling scam. While Esau is hunting, she prepares the stew.
- † Rebekah makes up an elaborate disguise for Jacob so that he will appear to be Esau—remember Isaac is almost blind—and she arranges for Jacob to feel and smell like Esau. Esau tricks Isaac successfully and receives his brother’s blessing.
  - † In the meantime, Esau returns home, makes another stew, brings it to his father, only to learn of the trick. His blessing has been given to his brother, and it cannot be taken back. “Esau hated his brother,” the story says. In fact, he says out loud for everyone to hear: “The day our father dies I am going to kill my brother.”
  - † And he means it. Again Rebekah intercedes and arranges a getaway for Jacob and he flees for his life. Jacob is on the run, banished from his home and family because of his deception and selfishness.
  - † And where is God in all of this? Where God always is—with the one who wounds and the wounded one. As John Buchanan says: “God comes to us not just when we are sitting in our pew in church or saying our prayers. God comes to us in our humanness: where we are most human, which means in our frailties and weaknesses, in our doubts, anxieties, fears, in our hope and our dreams.
  - † God comes to us in our disappointments, our failure to be good and strong and honest as we want to be. God comes to us in our guilt, our betrayals and deceits, as God came to Jacob.”
  - † For God came to Jacob in a dream offering hope and newness and possibility. Nothing could separate Jacob from God. And nothing could separate Esau from God either. After a long time, when they

were old, Jacob and Esau met again, together with their families and households, on either side of a river.

- † Jacob, finally acknowledging the pain he had caused, feared what Esau would do. And yet instead of revenge and destruction, Esau offered forgiveness. The river of their brokenness was crossed and only welcome was offered. The story of Jacob and Esau had a happy ending. But not all stories of sibling rivalry do.
- † Sometimes, no matter how hard we try or how good our intentions are, we can't make that conflict better. The river dividing us is too swollen and angry to cross. What then, is there to do?
- † I wish I could say for sure, but I have a hunch that waiting and patience and looking beyond the pain and staying close to God are a part of the answer.
- † This week I came across this beautiful story called "Bringing Esau Home," on a blog called RealLivePreacher.com. It's written by Gordon Atkinson, an American Baptist preacher in San Antonio, Texas. Listen for some clues to your familial struggles.

## Bringing Esau Home

Like Isaac, did you wonder where this strange voice came from? Was this not the boy you held and wrestled and played catch with, marveling at his strong arm and growing muscles?

The body was that of Esau, but it was the voice of Jacob you heard. Jacob, smooth and slick. Jacob with his own plans and hidden agendas. Jacob, desperately needing to be blessed but knowing nothing of blessings.

Like Isaac, you trusted the body and ignored the voice. You drew me close, son to father, and you blessed me with the sacred words of our tradition and way.

What we both remember is that I came home from college, my head addled with a shiny new education and my heart bursting with a young man's passion for Christ. I came into the modest home where I was nurtured and before the father who raised me and said some young and foolish things. God forgive me, I said that I could never live like you lived, with a nice house and all the comforts of home.

"Following Christ means leaving all this behind," I said. "This is fine for you and mom, I guess, but I can't live like this."

I said these things never thinking how they would hurt you. You who loved Christ enough to spend your whole life on the border and in between. You stood between your East Texas culture and its horrible racism. You stood between the expectations of your family and the way of Christ. You stood on the border between the poverty of Juarez and life as we knew it in El Paso.

I have come to understand that loves meets flesh on the border and in between. And love that never meets flesh is no kind of love at all. Love must have incarnation.

I loved the poor in some abstract sense, but you helped poor people. I had a theology, but you knew what it meant to whisper God words gently into the ears of the hurting. I cared about my



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image, but you cared about truth and about me.

You listened to me carefully and took me seriously. You shrugged off the sting of my words and looked behind them to my passion. You bore the pain and thought only of me.

And you said, "I'm so glad that you are taking seriously the call of Christ in your life. So very glad."

It took me fifteen years and having children of my own to understand what you gave me on that day. I have my own home now and my own family. I want to tell you that I still carry that blessing with me. I feel its power growing in my heart, and I hope to pass it on to my daughters when it is their time.

I have dreamed dreams and wrestled an angel or two. Keep the fire burning downstairs for me, for I am ready to cross the river and come home. I met Esau on the way and we are reconciled.

I'm bringing him home for Christmas this year.

†

† Oh, that we could all cross the river, embrace, and come home to the family relationships we long for. Maybe Venus and Serena do have something to teach us. To play hard and well, even against each

other, but at the end of the match, to stay close and share the parts of our lives that we can.

† May we, like Jacob and Esau, find the peace and reconciliation that God desires for us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, amen.

Sources:

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