

Sermon for June 25, 2017
"Grace and Dysfunctional Families"

Genesis 25:19-34

It's all a mess – a mess of pottage that is. Esau sold his birthright to be leader of the family and receive the lion's share of the inheritance for a mess of pottage; a bowl of stew. That's what it was. It was a kind of lentil soup that apparently was red in color. It was a bowl of chili!

But behind this messy culinary story was a dysfunctional family. The parents picked favorites among their children and then pit them against each other to promote their favorite's interests over the other's. The end result is that they cheat and steal from each other. Sounds like the plot for one of these "reality" talk shows where people end up throwing chairs at each other. Yet it is in the Bible, and not as a negative example of the evils of showing favoritism.

What's more, this story is part of the salvation history of ancient Israel! The passage begins with a preface that links this family to Abraham and Sarah and the covenant God made to make them a great nation more numerous than the stars in the sky. This is part of the story of how God created Israel to be God's blessing to the nations and, for us Christians, to be nation through which the Messiah would come. In this story Israel is still a small family and the potential matriarch is barren! The story could end there but God intervenes. This birth is not an accident but a gracious act of God, and twins no less! Even before birth these two sons are grappling with each other fighting for position. When they are born the younger is grabbing the older one's heel. Then Jacob buys the birthright for a bowl of soup. Later in chapter 27 Rebekah and Jacob will conspire to steal Isaac's blessing from Esau.

What is God's place in this dysfunctional family? In response to Isaac's prayer, Rebekah conceives. Then in response to Rebekah's prayer about her troubled pregnancy, God says, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." Has God, like a bad family therapist, allowed God's self to get pulled into the family dynamic by choosing sides? Is God showing favoritism just like Isaac and Rebekah? Or is God simply responding clinically to Rebekah's question with an explanation: "The children will strive against each other during their lives, that is why they are wrestling in your womb."

What is this story's place in our Biblical heritage? Is this story just another example of God choosing the lesser over the greater? We see this theme repeatedly in the Bible. God chose the youngest son of Jesse, David, to be king of Israel. God chose Joseph, the next to the youngest of Israel's children to take responsibility for delivering the whole family and the known world from famine. God chose Israel, a nation in chains, to be God's emissaries to the human race. God chose Mary, an unknown girl, to bear Jesus. And God chose Bethlehem, one of the smallest towns, to be the birthplace of the Messiah.

Maybe this story is, as some think, just an etiology story about Edom and Israel. Perhaps in later centuries when Israel and neighboring Edom were in conflict, they told this story to explain it all. The two countries were brothers. Like brothers they occasionally fought. But they also from time to time came to each other's aid.

Some have seen in this story a parable about the conflict between the male controlled and the female controlled parts of society. In the ancient near east women controlled the domestic side of life while men controlled the public side. Esau and Jacob can be seen as representing these two sides. Esau was a hairy hunter; a man's man, while Jacob hung around the tents and liked to cook. Esau was favored by the father, while Jacob was favored by the mother. In the end the female side won out. Some feminist theologians see this as a justification of the means women sometimes take to get their due in a sexist world.

All those are interesting avenues of investigation. But basically you have some kind of power struggle going on here. Is it between nations, or between genders, or between the haves and the have not's? Maybe it is all of the above. At the root of it all is a family that is not functioning in a healthy way. It will eventually result in one of the sons running away in fear for his life.

So why is God even involved with this dysfunctional family? Why is this dysfunctional family a part of our salvation history? Couldn't God find a perfectly well adjusted family to use to create Israel? Maybe there is no such thing as the perfect family. We all are maladjusted to one degree or another. All families experience some level of dysfunction.

Just look though the Bible. There are no perfect families there. Even Jesus was at odds with his half or step brothers and sisters. The first story of a family in the Bible ends with one brother killing the other, and from there it goes downhill.

Oh sure we don't all end up throwing chairs at each other on national television, or killing each other like Cain and Able. But none of us is perfect. Those imperfections are magnified when we start living together in families. Sometimes we can compensate and adjust for one another's shortcomings. Sometimes we end up simply enabling one another's addictions. All in all, families are messy.

The thing that sticks with me is that, as messy and dysfunctional as families are, God chooses to be involved with them. I am sure the Almighty who is infinite in power and wisdom could have found another way to reach out to humanity. But God chose to engage a family that, like many families, was dysfunctional. God chose to be at work in and through Jacob and Isaac and Esau and Rebekah. It was messy, but God was there.

That is grace! God graciously chooses to be there in the midst of our families even in the midst of their dysfunction. God chooses to get involved in the messiness of life. God is even at work though the mess to care for us and comfort us and guide us.

Jesus is a great example of this truth. In Jesus, God chose to enter into the messiness of life and then fully experience the dysfunctions of the human family. God could have chosen for Jesus to come into the most comfortable circumstances. Yet Jesus was born as a homeless refugee, persecuted by an unjust government and inequitable economic system. Like a dysfunctional family, the people in charge were showing favoritism to those with money and power. It was into such circumstances that God was incarnated! And through that divine presence God brought us the supreme example of love: Jesus choosing to die on the cross for the very human race that was crucifying him.

We serve a God of messiness. The Almighty is a God who is not afraid to get the divine hands dirty. That means that God is in the midst of the messiness of our lives. Jesus is in the midst of our dysfunctional families just as God was working in and through Isaac and Rebekah's family. God is there in the midst of our sibling rivalries just as God was there in the midst of Jacob and Esau's. God is not deterred by our failure to love our brothers and sisters as we ought to. Through it all God is there to redeem and save.

God is in the midst of your family, even when you do not act loving to one another. And God is there to help bring love and care. Sometimes churches and denomination can be like dysfunctional families. Sometimes people and groups within church act like siblings fighting one another. Sometimes leaders act like parents who show favoritism. Sometimes we help one another, and sometimes we just enable one another's dysfunctional behaviors.

But God is there in the midst of it all. God is there using us to bring the good news of God's love to the world. Even when we are not Christian in our actions, Christ is still working through us. Even when church life gets messy, God is in the midst of the mess.

Learn from Rebekah: when your families seem to be warring within you, turn to God. When Jacob and Esau were warring within her, Rebekah turned to God for guidance. When brothers and sisters in your family, or church family, are fighting, turn to God for guidance and peace. Let your Heavenly Father help you be a source of peace in the dysfunctional family messes of life.

Families are a mess. God is in the mess - of pottage, so enjoy the stew.