

A sermon preached by
Susan R. Andrews
Rye Presbyterian Church
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TEXT: Genesis 25: 19-34

GOD'S FIRST DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

Our larger denominational family – the Presbyterian Church, USA – is currently giving new meaning to the phrase “dysfunctional”. Like most historic mainstream Protestant churches – particularly here in the secular northeast – we Presbyterians are shrinking at alarming rates. Now, small – or at least smaller – is not always a bad thing – in fact, it is a very biblical thing to be – but only if we are passionately living out the Gospel message. But, from my perch as a presbytery executive, what has shrunk more than anything else in our national Presbyterian psyche, is our commitment, our fervor, our understanding of the Good News. In many places, we have lost the conviction that through our baptism, the Spirit of a Living Christ gives us the power and the call to change the world – to transform greed into grace – oppression into justice – despair into hope – to transform the brokenness of the world into the wholeness of the world. As a cradle Presbyterian – a third generation Presbyterian pastor - my grief about the changing world of the Presbyterian Church, USA is not our diminished membership. My grief is about our diminished faithfulness.

Now some folk will tell you that the reason the Christian witness in America is fading is because of the debates we have had through the years about supposedly “political issues”– proclamations opposing particular wars, a 30 year struggle to open the offices of the church to gay and lesbian pastors, elders and deacons, strong statements about the environment and immigration and nuclear armaments and Middle East politics and capital punishment and restorative justice for prisoners – yes, some will say that we have caused our own demise by focusing on controversy instead of the peace and joy of God’s love. Except folks, our entire biblical story gives us a lot more to think about than peace and joy – none more intriguing than our Genesis text for today. One blogger has this to say about the Jacob and Esau story that we consider this morning

Maybe we try to clean God up too much....Here we have the birth of Jacob – the birth of Israel. This is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that from him would come a great nation...He is God’s chosen. But he is from the beginning [a sinner]. He is the stealer of birthright and blessing. He is the tent-dwelling conniver. And Jacob is God’s chosen.

Sometimes I think we expect God to be present only in the clean parts of life. We talk about God’s presence when things go well...But in Genesis God is present in and through barrenness and birth, sibling rivalry and reconciliation, the founding and the falling of nations, the failures of the faithful as well as their triumphs. God is present in the messiness and the monumental – the mundane and the magnificent. Perhaps we should look for God even in the messiness of our own lives. (Dan Ott

When we recall this morning's story about Jacob and Esau, it seems as if God is actually behind the deception of Rebekah – embedded in the favoritism of these two parents - a God who causes conflict in order to carry out a divine plan. What is going on here?

Scott Peck, the psychiatrist and bestselling author, once wrote an essay about marriage. He reflects on his own thirty year covenant with his Chinese born wife – and he makes it clear that harmony was never been the secret to their long life together. In fact, he claims that the only reason for any of us to get married is what he calls the “friction” – the creative energy that differences and arguments and power struggles inevitably unleash. Peck concludes that the true test of married love is not the times of romance, but the times of conflict. Why? Because it is during tough times that the only way forward is to submit ego and self to the greater vision of the whole – to put the “we” before the “me.” And then, Peck says, we need to be prepared to be changed in the process.

The spiritual write Kathleen Norris has said the same thing about the church. Kathleen was a hippie poet living in Greenwich Village – cynical, agnostic, and anti-church – when she inherited her grandmother's homestead in a small farming town in South Dakota. Thinking that she would just travel west in order to sell this old relic, she instead ended up staying and loving the quiet and the simplicity of the prairie. And then, much to her own surprise, she ended up joining the Presbyterian Church down the street – the spiritual home where her grandmother's long life had been shaped. Needless to say, this sophisticated New Yorker found very little in common with the taciturn farmers she met in her new congregation. But, Norris quickly realizes that God never asks us to **like** our brothers and sisters

in Christ. Instead we are called to love them - warts and all – just as God has loved us through Jesus Christ.

My friends, sibling rivalry is inevitable in any family – and particularly within the family called the church. In a metaphorical sense, every congregational struggle is akin to Esau and Jacob wrestling in the belly of the church – spiritual siblings vying for power and blessing. And God, it seems, is always purposely present in the struggle.

In the 1980's I served a small parish in New Jersey. The major conflict in that congregation turned out to be new curtains in Fellowship Hall. This sounds minor, but believe me, it was major! The older women wanted to replace the old curtains with the same thing – drab, heavy, lined drapes that had to be dry-cleaned. The younger women, on the other hand, wanted to rip down those dowdy, dusty windows coverings and replace them with bright floral curtains made out of perma-pressed bed sheets. This controversy simply spun out of control – that is until I called all the women together, sat them down, and then locked the door. I informed them that until we had this issue settled, none of us was leaving. Well, they fussed and fumed and then talked things out – and finally the floral bed sheets won the day. Why? Because they were cheaper, and the younger women volunteered to do all the work! Thus began years of collaboration and friendship that wove these two antagonistic generations of women together – and strengthened the entire church. Creative “friction,” indeed!

And then there were the arguments that we endured as the Body of Christ in the congregation I served in Bethesda for 17 years - just prior to my coming to the

Hudson Valley 5 years ago. Some of the issues we struggled with were significant - paid soloists versus increased mission outreach in the community, whether or not to keep our wonderful Associate Pastor when he came out of the closet as a gay man, the push back when the Session made a prophetic statement opposing the first Gulf War, whether or not to build new common space with the Jewish congregation that had shared our sacred space for over 35 years – well you get the point. Every Christian community I have ever been part of in my 62 years of living has confronted the fact that we are all sinners, and that our churches are inevitably full of people who disagree with each other. And the challenge has always been to figure out how to demonstrate to the world that Christians can deal with differences and conflicts, not in nasty worldly ways, but in healthy and productive ways. Some may ask, why should we even bother “playing nice?” Because, my friends, the creation of unity amidst diversity is in the very spiritual DNA that soaks into our souls when we are blessed by the waters of Christian baptism.

Kathleen Norris has this to say about her small church family in South Dakota:

*Being church is a matter of: "struggling to maintain unity... given the fact that we have precious little uniformity. We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church, but a political party...At the risk of exposing myself as a terminal optimist, I'd say that things are as they should be...we are no less contentious than the fractious congregations of Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians addressed by St. Paul. Can I consider it a **good** thing – a sign of life – that Christians continue to fuss and fume and struggle, right down to the present day? It may look awful from the outside, and can feel awful on*

*the inside, but it is simply the cost of Christian discipleship...And that is why, when the battles rage, people hold on. They find a sufficient unity, and a rubbed raw but sufficient love, and even the presence of God. (pp. 272-273, **Amazing Grace**)*

Rye Presbyterian church is the oldest congregation in Hudson River Presbytery. For generations and centuries you have been a vital and creative witness in southern Westchester County. You are generous and prophetic with your mission and social justice witness. You are elegant and eloquent in worship that both reverences our God and lifts up the human soul. You are passionate and creative in educating your children and youth. And you are intentional in empowering skilled and successful adults to carry faith into the daily corridors of secular power and commerce. Yes, for over 300 years, you have been a worthy part of the universal Church of Jesus Christ – and a beacon to a broken and needy world.

But as you well know, you – like all congregations – have endured some troubles along the way – decades ago, a beloved pastor exposed for serious misconduct – another beloved pastor dying an untimely death with disruptive consequences – and most recently, a pastorate that brought both blessing and burden and an unexpected resignation. It is interesting to me that so much of your turmoil has revolved around the person and the role of the pastor. And yet, my friends, pastors come and pastors go. It is the culture and the story and the people of a congregation that continue.

And so, some questions come to mind. What is it in this place, in this history, in this odd conglomeration of wonderful people that at times sets up both unrealistic expectations and power struggles that lead to disappointment and disagreement? How might clear personnel policies and greater transparency and wider

collaboration and communication with the entire congregation help to transform your life together? How might the Spirit take this collection of opinionated and gifted individuals and knit you into a fresh band of disciples, poured out to serve a hurting world? I hope that as you seek interim leadership – and as you study the Alban institute report that has been received by the Session – that you will discover together the wisdom and vision to create new life and deeper commitment to serve Jesus Christ in this place. And I pray that you will rediscover what Kathleen Norris calls the “sufficient unity, the rubbed raw, but sufficient love, and even the presence of God.”

Rebekah and Isaac, Esau and Jacob were one of the first dysfunctional families in the long history of God’s people. But they were by no means the last. For 2000 years, those of us created and called by God to shape the world in the image of Jesus Christ, have struggled to become community – to be more together than any of us can be alone – as we wrestle together in this womb called the church. Just as God used both Jacob and Esau to further the kingdom, so God uses each one of us. And in the end, God also blesses each one of us – for one reason and one reason only. We are blessed, my friends, in order to become a blessing to the world.

May it be so for you – and for this blessed community called the Rye Presbyterian Church. Amen