

Family Values
Pentecost 6A
PPC
12 July 2020

Romans 8:1-11
Genesis 25:19-34

Families. We celebrate them and we suffer in them. Family connections make up the most important relationships of our lives. There is a plethora of literature written on family dynamics as psychologists and social scientists look at how our families function and how their functioning impacts so greatly who we are.

Often, I want to laugh when people who claim to be Christian spout off about a return to the family values displayed in scripture. I wonder if they have, indeed, actually read the bible. As the saga of the family of Abraham continues, today we read about the long-awaited birth of Jacob and Esau. Once again, it a birth that takes place after a long wait.

Fred Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and author, writes in his book *Whistling in the Dark* “That you can be lonely in a crowd...or with your family, even with the person you love most in the world.” He goes on to write “To be lonely is to be aware of an emptiness that takes more than people to fill. It is to sense that something is missing which you cannot name.” He quotes Psalm 137 “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (137:1). Finally, he writes, “Maybe in the end it is Zion that we’re lonely for, the place we know best by longing for it, where at last we become who we are, where finally we find home.”

Buechner’s father committed suicide when he was young and in many of his books his longing is palpable. Whether or not we’ve experienced such a traumatic event in our lives, I believe that most of us have this longing, this desire to be in that place that affords us such comfort and a sense of belonging.

In these stories that focus on barren women who finally are able to give birth, I wonder if this loneliness, this longing for home, is really the issue that is being addressed. We know that at the time these stories take place, a woman's status as someone of value was directly connected to her ability to bear children. The ability to create a family, to create the illusion of making a place that is safe and protected, precisely because it is a family, is a substitute perhaps, for the longing for God.

The conundrum that presents itself in this belief of family security is that so often our families disappoint or hurt or become lethal places for growth. One of our hardest learnings of life is that our parents are people - with warts and insecurities and their own hurts. Yet we love them. When our children dream their own dreams, the dreams we had for them may disappear in the wind, leaving us feeling sad.

Sarah and her daughter-in-law Rebekah both suffered from infertility. Whether ancient or modern, infertility is a deep sadness for those who experience it. If one longs for children, the sadness that comes when those children never appear can be overwhelming. I don't imagine that one expects good things to materialize out of infertility. In fact, infertility may feel more like the absence of divine activity rather than its presence. Some people may interpret this inability to give birth as a divine punishment. It is not, but it surely can feel like it. To both of these women, though, their barrenness eventually leads to fruitfulness. With that fruitfulness comes great expectations of what will be. Our dreams for our children are never small. And I will add that this is true whether your children entered this world through your birth canal or were adopted. They are your children.

However, if we look a bit at the family dynamics in the Abraham stories, we can find signs of dysfunction. Isaac, let us recall, is the promised son of Sarah and Abraham. All we

really know about Isaac is how protective his mother was of him and yet she never appears in the story where Abraham is prepared to sacrifice him. Where was Sarah when this story unfolded? Despite the fact that Abraham had a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, and six sons with Keturah, at his death “Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac” (Gen. 25:5) Those other seven sons he sent away. So much for warm and fuzzy family relations. Abraham actively disinherited seven of his eight sons and their families and then banished them. It’s hard to imagine a better recipe for family resentment.

With this family dynamic in play, Isaac and Rebekah try to start their family. After a long period of infertility, Rebekah finds that she is pregnant. During Rebekah’s pregnancy, the twins that she is carrying “jostled each other within her.” The Biblical writers are warning us of impending trouble as this in utero jostling seems to be a sure sign of the family feuding that will continue outside of the womb. Surprisingly, in a reversal of that culture’s conventional practice, God announces to Rebekah that the older boy will serve the younger.

As one commentator wrote “The fact that Hairy [the red] and Heel-Grasper ever managed to reconcile in later life and live out their years at peace with one another may just be one of the most significant pieces of grace in the Book of Genesis.”¹

Why was Jacob destined to be the preferred one of God? Even if we were not privy to Rebekah’s pre-natal revelation about the boy’s jostling with one another in the womb, we can find clues in the narrative that point easily to which of the boys will get all the breaks. Esau, to put it bluntly, is not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Can you picture Hoss in *Bonanza*? He had a good heart and cared for everyone but the gap-toothed grin and vaguely befuddled look in the

¹ Scott Hoezee at: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>.

eyes told you that this was one guy who was easy to gang up on mentally. A clever soul like Jacob could outwit Esau without much effort. Jacob lives up to his name for it means “trickster.”

While it isn't explicitly stated in the text, we get the distinct impression from Genesis 25 that Esau probably won't have much use for his sissy little brother; the Mama's boy, if ever there was one. Jacob was a quiet man, we are told, “living in tents.” That detail is meant to show us how much like a woman Jacob was. Women lived in the tents.

While Esau and his father sat around swapping hunting stories, downing their beer and belching into the afternoon sun, Jacob would be with his mama learning the finer points of dicing vegetables and adding just the right soupçon of herbs to make a delicately balanced stew. For his part, I imagine, Isaac just didn't know what to make of his younger son. And for her part, Rebekah could scarcely abide the aroma that emanated off of her older boy. So, the family quietly divided into two camps, neither fully understanding the other but generally maintaining a respectful distance from one another. For years, this dynamic continued and the family avoided open conflict.

Until, that is, the day when “Red” earned his nickname by trading his birthright for some red lentil soup with a side of sourdough bread that Jacob had learned how to make under his mother's tutelage. In his desperate hunger, Esau will say anything to be served a portion of that amazing smelling stew that Jacob is offering. While the stew was an excellent culinary experience and settled Esau's grumbling stomach, when he had finished eating he realized that Jacob wasn't kidding about the birthright thing. He had just traded an invaluable inheritance for a bowl of soup. This isn't the last time that Jacob will steal from his brother for his own gain.

It is Jacob, not Esau, who becomes the father of the nation Israel as he sires the twelve sons who become the heads of the tribes of Israel. Esau becomes the titular head of rival Edom

which is today southwestern Jordan. Fratricide would characterize their later family history.

Perhaps these stories give us clues as to why there is such tribal strife in the Middle East today.

We don't know why God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael, or one of Keturah's boys to be the heir to the covenant. We don't know why God chose Jacob instead of Esau. The choice appears to be random and arbitrary. Maybe it was. In that all of these undeserving characters are so deeply flawed, so entirely human, God's choice was clearly not based upon their merit. None of the players in this story come off well. They give the lie to the idea of the so-called Biblical "family values."

Maybe then, what we would do well to remember is that if God's grace comes to us at all in this world, it comes to us in the midst of our brokenness and precisely because of that brokenness. God works in the real - and messy - world of human relationships. None of those family members in today's story are deserving of being saved from themselves. All of them had much to reflect upon when it came time to look at their own behaviour. From this, I believe, we can find hope in even the most dysfunctional of families. Does it surprise you that these biblical families look, feel, sound and act suspiciously like our own?

In this time, in this place, when all around us threatens us with unscrupulous behavior and even death, we need to remember these stories. We need to remember that God uses us - each of us - for good in this world. Unfortunately, there are many today who, while claiming a relationship with God, act as if they don't understand what that means.

Part of each of our faith journey's, I believe, is that we continually search for the better part of ourselves; that part that is divine. In days like these, that feels like a difficult challenge. And here is the really hard part - it is not our job to judge others. Jesus instructs us that we must first take the log out of our own eye before we decide that two men can't raise a child together or

that we're not racist. A faith journey involves seeking - seeking always to find our better selves. What we can learn from these biblical families is that we would do best to look at our own families and go from there. Families take many shapes and forms. A society that reflects God's love is full of diversity - race, color, gender, and politics

In these times when we're feeling abandoned perhaps, or forgotten by God, these biblical families can point us in the direction of God, In our barrenness, in our pain, in our anger, God brings new life out of what appear to us to be hopeless situations. Leonard Cohen wrote and sang "Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."

I know that when my family fell apart, although it was hard work, God was with us as we created something new. The miracle of that journey is that we have all found our way in the desert to a better place. Hope arose from the ashes. Sometimes we can't see what's ahead and yet in our brokenness we can be sure that God is at our side, walking us all home.

AMEN.