

## **The Dysfunctional Family of God: Genesis 25:19-34**

June 13, 2014, Norwalk Christian Church, Year A, Proper 10 (Called "For Sale by Owner" in church bulletin)

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I had to laugh when I saw that this story was the Old Testament text chosen for this Sunday by the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary, the source of the texts we preach on each Sunday. What better text for the Sunday that falls right in the middle of summer break than a text about siblings fighting. Can I get an Amen?

Though we, like the snowman Olaf in the movie Frozen, certainly love summer along with the gift of spending more time with the ones we love, come the middle of July, no family appears that functional.

Of course, this biblical family puts the rest of our dysfunctional families to shame. If I were naming my sermon this morning, rather than a few days ago when I came up with the title printed in the bulletin, I'd probably call it: "The Dysfunctional Family of God".

At first, I thought my sermon would focus on Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. I mean, who does that?! Well, if we're being honest, we all do it at times, don't we? That's where the sermon title in the bulletin came from: "For Sale by Owner." If I would've followed that original theme, I could've told you about that episode of The Simpsons, where Homer Simpson sells his soul to the devil for a donut, and tie it into all the ways we do this in our lives.

I'm thinking of lifelong relationships that are sacrificed for momentary pleasure. Or how we, as a nation pursue empty promises and policies from politicians, focusing on what makes life easy now, instead of thinking about the inheritance we are leaving our children. Or how we, as church, will often pursue momentary fixes in policy and ministry, avoiding controversial issues and hard decisions as we seek to please the people in the pews, while giving up our birth right as an outpost of the kingdom of God in this place. Don't be like Esau!...that's what I was going to preach.

It would've been a fine sermon, I'm sure. But as I dug deeper into the text, I began to feel sorry for this brother. We think being the father's favorite was a good thing. But think of the burden he must of bore. And, after all, do you blame Esau for despising the birthright of a dysfunctional family like his?

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This morning we enter the story of this family right in the middle, so let me back up the story a bit. From the very first when we meet the patriarch and matriarch Abraham and

Sarah, then called Abram and Sarai, we find dysfunction. After giving up on their ability to have children, they are promised by God that they will be the parents of a new nation. When children don't come as promised, Abraham takes matters into his own hands, and impregnates his female servant, Hagar. Ishmael is born and Abraham thinks the problem is solved, but when the presence of Hagar and Ishmael become too much for Sarah to bear, Abraham kicks them out of the family, leaving them to fend for themselves in the wilderness.

Finally a child, Isaac, is born to Sarah, the child of promise. And just when they are ready to live happily ever after, Abraham gets it into his head that God wants him to sacrifice--read *kill*--his only son. We are told God intervenes and saves Isaac, but I'm sure the damage is already done to boy. How do you recover from such an experience as that, your father raising a knife to kill you, because he believes it God's will?

We aren't told much about Rebekah's family, and that's part of the problem. She was from a time and culture that was not friendly to women. The fact that we even know her name at all is a triumph of history, for too often the names of women were left out. We are told of all the sons of Abraham by name, but what of his daughters?

When it is time for Isaac to get married, things are handled by Abraham. He sends out a servant to find a wife for his son, and that's what the servant does. He finds Rebekah, and negotiates a deal with her father, to which she agrees, though we can only imagine the consequences if she didn't. She is then presented to Isaac to be his wife, and we are told that he loves her. We are never told how she feels about the arrangement.

And after all this, we are told that Isaac and Rebekah also face infertility. Isaac is 40 when he marries Rebekah, but he is 60 when Rebekah gives birth to the twins, Esau and Jacob. That's 20 years of infertility. Isaac prays to God, yes, but how many times, we are not told? 20 years is a long time to wait for a prayer to be answered.

When the prayer is finally answered, and the couple has twins, the twins begin fighting inside Rebekah's womb. The pain is so much that it makes Rebekah wish she were dead, and the fighting and pain doesn't end once the twins are born.

Perhaps we should have a little sympathy for this family today, and a little relief. Relief that maybe we aren't as bad of parents as we thought we were; maybe our family isn't as dysfunctional as it seems!

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Isaac and Rebekah have so much to bear. This doesn't excuse their behavior, but it does explain it. As happens to many of us, the ghosts of our pasts have a way of influencing our present relationships. Who can forget the day when your children say back to you the same things you said to them. You can see yourself in the mirror of their actions, and you don't very look good. We sometimes play out the scripts we've been given, treating our spouses, children and siblings the way we saw it modeled in our family. And this is fine, when things are good. But when the family system is dysfunction, it's hard not to repeat the dysfunction, and even, at times, magnify it.

Perhaps Esau acts the way he acts because he can no longer live under the burden of being the favored twin. Isaac favors Esau, we are told, because he has a taste for game meat and Esau is a hunter. He likes Esau best because Esau gives him good food. But what happens when the game isn't as good. When Esau can't or doesn't want to hunt anymore? Will Dad's love end? Maybe that's why he becomes so famished while hunting: he has no time to care for himself; he must incessantly earn his father's favor. Who wouldn't despise such a birthright from such a father?

Jacob is no perfect child either. What brother would take advantage of his twin at his most vulnerable time, with holding a desperately needed meal until he can steal away his inheritance? Rebekah, we are told, likes Jacob best. We aren't told why, but we can imagine. Maybe she feels bad for him, since Dad favors his brother. From the moment he is born, Jacob is a "supplanter." That's what his name means. He came out of the womb grabbing at his brother's heels, and he's always going to be the underdog who tricks and connives his way up the ladder. If he's going to make it in life, it's going to be by clawing his way to the top, and everyone he steps on is just collateral damage.

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Being family is hard. In the middle of July, during summer break, yes. But anytime, anywhere. It was hard 4,000 years ago, in the days of Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac, and it's hard today.

But where is the good news in that? So we aren't the most dysfunctional family on the block. Big deal! We could've learned that from watching an episode of Supernanny or The Kardashians. We're all messed up. We get that. Is that why this story is here, and it was assign for us to read on this Summer Sunday?

For the ancient Israelites, this story explained why they never got along with the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. Sometimes it helps to know that your dysfunction can be explained. You're messed up for a reason. But we need more than explanation.

We praise these characters for their faith, yet it's hard to see a praiseworthy one in the bunch. Yet, these are the stories we tell our children in Sunday School? What are we thinking?! Are these the characters we want our children to exemplify?

But there is another character in this story: *God*. This isn't just any messed up family, this is God's messed up family. God chose them, every one of them, flaws and all. When God covenanted with Abraham, God was making Abraham God's kin. God's people. God's family. This story is told, not simply to explain where Israel as a people came from, though it does that. Nor is it told to simply help us feel better about the state of our families, though it certainly does.

This story is good news because in the midst of this mess is God. God doesn't flee this family, looking for better candidates to birth salvation into the world. God works in the midst of the mess, choosing the weak over the strong. Choosing the most messed up over the ones who have it all figured out. God sees a challenge, and God accepts the challenge, and sticks with it, no matter what, crafting something beautiful.

Because of God's choice, the dysfunctional family of Abraham and Sarah gives birth to a great nation and a blessed people, and through this family, the very presence of God that we call Jesus is birthed into our world.

We may sell our souls for a donut or for a bowl of soup. We may claw our way to the top, stepping on every around us in the process in order to find success. We may repeat the patterns of our dysfunction. We may give into our worst inclinations. We may mess up time and time again. We may not look the part...but we are the dysfunctional, beautiful family of God, and there are no limits to what God can do through us.

Through the grace of God, the pattern can be broken. Our family story is never over. There is always hope. There is always new life. That is why Paul can say in Romans 8, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." No matter who you are, or what you've done. No matter how messed up your family is. There is no condemnation. None. You are God's daughter. You are God's son. And God loves you. God chooses you. And God will use you and all of us messy people to change our world.

Christ invites us to the family table just as we are. At this table we learn again what it means to be family, to love in spite of our flaws. To build up, not supplant. To bless, not curse. To treat everyone as equals. For at this table we receive and give the unconditional love of God, as we eat this bread and drink this cup. Amen.