

Family Reunion with Jacob and Esau  
Genesis 32: 3-8; 33:1-12  
August 25, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

I have a tee shirt that I don't wear very often; it was given to me by a member of a congregation I served. It says, "Jesus loves you but I'm his favorite." I've never known what to do with that shirt; I mean, where would be an appropriate place to wear it?! I am not quite sure. As a consequence, it has sat in my drawer quite literally for years, along with another "inappropriate" tee shirt, proudly given to me by a guerilla fighter in El Salvador.

Everyone wants to be someone's "favorite," and who better to be favored by than God? That's at least *part* of the dynamic that is embedded in the story of family dysfunction prominently displayed in the bible through the generations of the Abrahamic line; stories that one might find remarkable in a sacred text except for the fact that they so often imitate our own.

How many of you attended a family reunion of some type this summer? I come from a rather small family; family reunions weren't a thing for us. I only remember going to one on each side of our family growing up. Our immediate family was close and that seemed enough. But I am intrigued by large families that gather regularly in places near and far, some with matching tee shirts, photographers, organized activities, and huge spreads of food: they paint an idyllic picture in my mind that I suspect is only an illusion. Being part of a family system can be a wonderful blessing, but it is also plenty of hard work. That's the reason, I guess, we don't get to *choose* our families; some of us would never end up being connected to those we are biologically closest to!

That seems to be the case in the family of Isaac and Rebekah. Recall the story: they marry and like their parents before them, they struggle to have children. When they are finally blessed with pregnancy, twins are born, evidently fighting from within the womb, according to the biblical text. Jacob wants to be first, to be in charge, to be loved the most. And he is, by his mother. Esau, the actual elder of the two if only barely, is Dad's favorite. Knowing only that much we can see a set up for family problems.

Parental favoritism is only part of the dynamic here. Jacob carries on the long tradition of male family member deception: Abraham tried to fool the king by presenting Sarah as his sister rather than his wife. This deception gets tried again in subsequent generations, none any more successful than the one before. Jacob, known as the "trickster" because he cheats his brother out of his birthright, also learns from the craftiness of his mother, who colludes with him to alter his identity to confuse his father. I suppose neither Isaac nor Esau are innocent in this wild drama, each ignoring or minimizing their own influence in the foursome to bring about justice and right relationship. No wonder after their parents die, Jacob finds himself on the run from Esau (after also deceiving his uncle Laban, and favoring Rachel over Leah), certain that his brother's only interest is revenge. It's a tale of lies and favoritism and selfishness and power grabbing. It's a story of desire and fear and brokenness and envy. But it's real and relatable; it's familiar and familial. Whether it makes you say, "Glad that's not my family" or "Wow! How did they know about us?" it reminds us of how difficult it is to live in right relationship, even and perhaps especially with those who know us best. And it's a story about the graciousness and restorative nature of God, who does not exclude these folks for their humanity but instead

wrestles with them and does not let go of the hope of their potential, the possibility that these are the very ones who will bear God's image and live into God's reign.

Living together is hard! It takes intentional work to be in healthy, life-giving relationships, whether they are with your life partner, your children, siblings, parents or grandparents. Just as I wished for instructions to accompany each child I gave birth to, no one outside our family systems really teaches us how to honor, respect and care for the people in our own household, the ones who leave the toilet seat up or don't empty the dishwasher or just don't seem to be on the same wave length as we are. And yet these are the people we are born to, given to, by accident or design, to grow with, to love, to live with, to be responsible to and for, at least for some significant portion of our lives. Learning how to appreciate our diversity, even within the family unit, working around and with one another, laughing, weeping, struggling, succeeding together shape who and what we become, who and what we value, look for, connect with or disconnect from as we claim our individual place in the world. Jacob and Esau's troubled relationship was just one more in a series of troubled sibling relationships from Cain and Abel to Isaac and Ishmael all the way down to Jesus and his brothers and sisters, about whom we know nothing except that they existed. Family relationships challenge our sense of self and give us more than ample opportunity to embody our faith, all the while we consider the ways and wisdom of the Divine who gave us to each other to begin with.

And that's the remarkable part in this story, and in our own, isn't it? That God is present here, regardless of how these folks treat one another. God is present in this enduring longing for "the blessing", for the promise of life and prosperity, for the hope of relationship and divine favor. God is present as human brokenness is worked into the story, not excluded from it. The

fact that these folks looked like a hot mess was not lost on God, but it also did not make God turn away. Before encountering his brother in the text we read this morning, Jacob wrestles with an “angel” he can only understand as God. They struggle in the night but neither lets go of the other; in fact, the skirmish marks Jacob for life—body and spirit, as he turns to confront the brother he has so offended.

And what about Esau? We don’t see his transformative moment, but he comes to meet his brother not with righteous revenge, which might be entirely justified, but in peace. It is only Jacob’s guilt that makes him fearful of Esau; so much so that he divides his family lest they all be killed. But Esau isn’t there to get even, but to get “right”, to restore what neither ever really had: the vision of a healed and honest relationship with each other, brothers by blood but also by faith in a living, loving God.

So, I don’t know what your family dynamic is like. At one time I wondered how it was that my sisters and I all came from the same household. But as we grow older in many ways, we have more in common than we do apart. Perhaps we are coming full circle. Or perhaps we are learning that time passes quickly and there are no guarantees; rather than stand far off from one another, harboring the difficulties and differences of some past life, perhaps there is no time like now to begin to move *toward* those who have hurt us, not because it is in anyway easy, but because it reflects the desire and heart of our merciful, compassionate God.

Often, it’s easier to be “Christian” to those we don’t know and to those who don’t know us! But an authentic faith invites us to be reconciled with *all* from whom we are estranged, even those who we call family. Jacob met Esau with fear in his heart and Esau embraced him, eager to put away the past and begin again.

God invites us to do the same. There is nothing that can separate us from God, and nothing that is more God-like than to be reconciled with one another. In this time in our history when we are threatened with more separation and fragmentation than usual, maybe there's a family member you need to reach out to; maybe there's someone fearful of hearing from you. Maybe you're not related but there's a relationship in your life that needs healing. There is no time like the present to begin the process of living faith authentically; there is no time like now to let the brokenness of yesterday be healed in the hope of tomorrow. No family is perfect; no meaningful relationships are without struggle. But Jacob and Esau remind us that God is in the midst of all our relationships and can and will transform them and us if we risk being present to one another as God is present to us.