

NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship

“Family Values: The Twins Aren’t Getting Along”

February 7, 2016

Preached by: Pastor Jim Peck

Bible Reading: Genesis 25: 19 - 34

Will you pray with me? Holy God, be our teacher and guide as we open and examine your Word. Amen.

On a regular basis in American life, we hear voices speak of “Judeo-Christian values” or “Biblical family values,” voices from both the religious world and the political world. I’ll just say that these are code words for a certain view about what defines a family: a male husband, a female wife, and children. More pointedly, a male husband who is dominant, a female wife who is submissive, and children who are obedient to their parents.

Now there is no dispute that the Bible contains verses that support this understanding of what is a family. Some of them are in the New Testament Epistles, notably Ephesians 5: 15 - 33 and First Corinthians 7. Some are in the Old Testament.

The entire book of Proverbs is written as a parenting manual for raising sons. Its advice is easily transferred to the raising of daughters.

Personally, my favorite advice from Proverbs about marriage is: “It is better to die of thirst in the desert than to marry a contentious wife.” Easily translated to: “It is better to die of thirst in the desert than to marry the wrong person.”

Families, we know from observation and experience, take many forms. Sometimes, a family looks exactly like the male husband, female wife, and children version. Sometimes, it does not. Our United Church of Christ recognizes that families take many forms and strives to support families in the form they take in reality. The real people standing here right now are more important than the ideal people standing somewhere in your imagination.

One of my favorite things about the inexhaustibility of the Bible as a resource for understanding our relationship to God and other people is the stories. When we put the ideal family descriptions we find in one place in the Bible next to the stories about real families we find in another place in the Bible, we discover that the real families don’t always match the ideal descriptions.

This should not undermine our confidence in the Bible as our sacred text. We're dealing with two different kinds of literature - advice and narrative.

The family stories are more interesting. Family stories are always more interesting than general words of advice disconnected from any real people. So, today and for the next two Sundays, we're going to hear parts of the story of a real family, twin brothers, as recorded in Genesis.

The twins are Esau and Jacob. They are Abraham's grandsons. Abraham is the childless man to whom God made a promise: "I will make of you a great nation. Through you, all the world will be blessed." (Genesis 12). I so wish our engagement with Genesis was not so focused on Chapter 1. The vast majority of Genesis is a family saga of Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, their son Jacob and his wives Leah and Rachel, and their sons who became the twelve tribes of the ancient Hebrew people.

Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah. When she did not start having babies right away, Isaac prayed and Rebekah conceived twins. It was a difficult pregnancy. Genesis 25: 22 says "The children struggled together within her, and she said "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" Rebekah is a woman of great restraint in her choice of words. So she prayed about it. The text says she went to inquire of the Lord, to ask God "These twins are not getting along and I want to know what the heck is going on!?" Classic prayer of lament or complaint.

God's answer is: "They are never going to get along. They will found two nations. The older child will serve the younger child. They are never going to get along."

The twins are born. The first one came out red and they named him Esau, which is a Hebrew word meaning "red." The second came out with his hand gripping Esau's heel, noted because it is both unusual and symbolic of the conflict these brothers are going to have all their lives. He was named Jacob, a Hebrew word meaning, "he takes by the heel."

They were very different in personality, Esau being a man of the outdoors and a hunter, Jacob being a quieter man who lived in tents. And in a stroke of masterful parenting, Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob, because if you're twins are going to be in conflict with one another from before they were born, Dad and Mom can really help things by choosing sides.

Whenever I hear someone say "We should model our families after the Bible," I want to ask, "Oh, you mean like Isaac and Rebekah. That turned out so well, don't you think?" If you're going to claim the Bible as your book, you better know what's in it!

It mattered who was born first. The oldest son, even if older by only a few minutes, is the one who will inherit his father's land and name and cattle. Esau is the first born. He's the one entitled to the birthright. The birthright involved not only the estate, but also a blessing bestowed from father to son, an empowering to carry on the family's name and purpose. The younger son would also receive a blessing, but it was not as meaningful as the one given to the older son.

We have in our United Church of Christ a small group of 30 churches in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Illinois that are Hungarian in heritage. The Hungarian Reformed Church traces its history to the Reformation, a Calvinist expression of Protestantism. During the great immigrant wave of the late 1800s and early 1900s, tens of thousands of Hungarian men and women came to the United States to work in the factories and mines. They formed churches, mostly Catholic, but many Hungarian Reformed churches, too. Today, most of those Hungarian Reformed churches are Presbyterian. We have a few in the United Church of Christ.

When I studied this hidden history, I learned that this immigration wave was driven by younger sons. As the older son had inherited the family farm or business, or had gotten an education, the younger sons faced poor prospects for their future in the old country. Leaving for the opportunities in America became the best choice, coming to a place where you could work whether you were the second son or the third son, because, here, no one cared that you weren't the oldest son. There is a clear advantage to being an older son.

The westward expansion of the American Frontier was driven in large part by this same inheritance pattern. Back in Ohio, the older son inherited the farm or the business. The younger son could certainly work for his older brother, but with all that homesteading land available, why not head west?

In a family with only daughters, the oldest daughter would inherit the land or the business, and her husband would take over the running of it. Not the only way things worked, but common.

Here's a question I've asked before: If you were desperate, full of despair, what would you give up in exchange for relief?

For Esau, returning home one day from working in the fields or tending the flocks or, perhaps, from hunting wild game, it did not take much, just a bowl of red lentil stew. Certain he was about to die, he traded his birthright for a bowl of red lentil stew. He probably wasn't about to die, but our raw emotions combined with exhaustion can make us do the strangest, most irrational things. Things like trading our inheritance and our future for a bowl of red lentil stew. Well, at least it was something healthy.

These are young adult men by now. And the twins still aren't getting along. If Jacob was any kind of brother at all, he would have insisted Esau sit, rest, eat, drink, tell me about how the fields are, how the flocks are, how the hunt went. But the twins have never gotten along, so Jacob, an opportunist if there ever was one, seized the opportunity to exploit his brother's hunger and exhaustion, his fear of dying, and get what he wanted. Jacob both saved Esau's life and stole Esau's future.

And now the elder would serve the younger, just as God had said before they were born.

Tune in next week for "The Twins REALLY Aren't Getting Along!" And a little more about what God is up to in this story.

Amen.

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