

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 16, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 25:19-34

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: The Birth of Jacob & Esau (Strength)

[prayer]

My younger sister and I have been roommates for five years this month. When people learn we live together, they often say, "I could never do that! My siblings and I do better in short doses."

I usually laugh and assure them that there was a time my sister and I absolutely *would not* have chosen to live together, either. Even now we have our fair share of disagreements. But we are fortunate that for this season we have mostly managed to find the right combination of love, patience, tolerance, and teamwork to make our living arrangement work. (It also helps that we genuinely enjoy each other's company.) While it's not always easy, we are grateful for each other. We know that if we are fortunate to live long lives, our relationship with each other will be the longest relationship either of us have, so we choose to invest in it.

Today's Scripture lesson demonstrates that our family relationships are both a matter of circumstance and a matter of choice. Many of us are related to our family by blood, so choice can feel like it has very little to do with it. But blended families, adopted families, foster families, and 'chosen' families teach us otherwise: All healthy relationships require some choice. Choices like patience instead of impatience, faithfulness instead of unfaithfulness, gentleness instead of severity, self-control instead of selfishness. We make choices about which relationships we invest in and which we do not. Even our relationship with God involves choice. God has chosen us through prevenient grace, but we must choose God in return for our relationship to bear fruit.

Truthfully, it is sad to me that so many people are surprised adult sisters would choose to live together. The fact that we assume rivalry, rather than friendship, is

the norm between siblings highlights the prevalence of conflict and disharmony in our families. We accept that this is just the way things are. Why is that?

Some of you have disclosed through prayer requests and conversation difficult and painful family relationships. I am certain there are others among us who have similar experiences but choose to keep that pain private. Conflict in our families is uniquely upsetting because family is supposed to be a refuge of unconditional love. It hurts when our family will not or cannot nurture and support us.

Like every other human institution, our families are not immune to the effects of sin – things like jealousy, competition, scarcity mindset, grasping after what is not ours. The Bible is full of fraught family relationships, especially fraught sibling relationships. But the good news is that it is in the particularities of these messy human bonds that God chooses to work out salvation history.

Today we begin the Jacob cycle, which covers eleven chapters smack in the middle of the Book of Genesis. This is a complicated cycle of ambition, deceit, sorrow, love, enmity, and sacred encounters with God. It has all the hallmarks of a good soap opera. And it begins here, with the birth of Jacob and Esau – Phase 3 in God’s covenant plan for humanity.

At the center of this story is a cryptic oracle that Rebekah receives from the LORD. We met Rebekah last week, when she chose to leave her home in Paddan Aram and marry Isaac. Fast forward twenty years and Isaac and Rebekah still have not been able to have children. Isaac intercedes with God for Rebekah, and she miraculously conceives twins. But her pregnancy is incredibly painful. When we are in pain, we want to know the meaning and purpose of that pain. So, Rebekah goes to God for an explanation. God tells her that she is pregnant with twins and these two babies will beget two different nations. “One people will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger” (v. 23).

The English translation sounds unequivocal: The older twin will serve the younger. But the Hebrew is less decisive; it can be read as either “The elder shall serve the younger” or “The elder, the *younger* shall serve.” The English makes it sound like God is predicting the future for Rebekah, but the Hebrew is more nuanced; God explains the reason for Rebekah’s pain and then *interprets* the twins’ relationship. It is not a given that the twins will be against each other, just a possibility.

We believe that God is omniscient (all knowing). We understand this to mean that God knows every possible future outcome. But God has also chosen to give up absolute control over the future by giving human beings free will. God makes allowances for our free will to act upon the future, too. The future is the result of our wills and God's will working with, and sometimes against, each other.

God leaves room for Rebekah and Isaac to make choices about how they will raise their children in light of the oracle He has made. Unfortunately, the parents choose to relate to the twins in a way that perpetuates that conflict – they choose to play favorites.

Esau, whose name means “Red,” is born first. He becomes Isaac's favorite because of his skill as a hunter. Jacob is born shortly after Esau, in hot pursuit of his twin, grasping Esau's heel as if to pull him back into the womb. Perhaps this is a coincidence; perhaps the birth is a foreshadowing of things to come. Either way, Rebekah chooses Jacob as *her* favorite. His name means “Heel-Grasper” or “God follows after.”

Neither boy knows about the oracle, but their parents make their choices in such a way that the future begins to firm in the direction of conflict; the oracle becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The conflict centers on the birthright, a legal mechanism through which the patriarch's power, possessions, and responsibilities pass to the firstborn son. Although Esau and Jacob are twins, Esau was born first and therefore will inherit Isaac's position as patriarch. This does not sit well with Rebekah who attempts to manipulate the future so that it fits the oracle and Jacob inherits (which will be demonstrated in detail a couple chapters later).

Scripture does not describe the twins' childhood, but we can fill in the gaps with our imaginations, picturing the ways the parents act on their favoritism – Isaac celebrating Esau's accomplishments over Jacob's, Rebekah stroking Jacob's ego over Esau's.

This story is a case study of nature versus nurture. Because while Rebekah and Isaac make choices that shape how the brothers relate to each other, Jacob and Esau are also individuals with clashing personalities. Esau is at home in the wild, hunting and gathering, eternally restless; Jacob is at home among the tents,

leading a more settled, pastoral existence. Esau is impatient, undisciplined, and reckless; Jacob is quiet, clever, and opportunistic.

Jacob has spent his life observing his brother. He knows his weaknesses; he knows Esau lives according to his bodily urges. Have you seen those Snickers candy bar ads where someone is acting out of sorts until they're handed a Snickers bar? The commercials end with the tagline "You're not you when you're hungry."¹ That's Esau coming home from the hunt; he's hangry (hungry + angry). But instead of telling him to eat a Snickers bar, Jacob offers him a bowl of lentil stew...on the condition that Esau give Jacob his birthright.

What's remarkable is that Esau agrees to this ridiculous trade! Esau "sold his birthright to Jacob...He ate, drank, rose up, and went his way. Thus," the scripture says, "Esau despised (scorned) his birthright" (v. 34 paraphrased).

Esau makes the choice to trade his long-term security for short term gratification. Meanwhile, Jacob tucks this little encounter away for another day. Ultimately, the birthright is not Esau's to give; Jacob must secure Isaac's blessing. But the way has been prepared for the brothers' falling out, which we will read about next week.

Both Jacob and Esau are culpable in this story. Esau is careless with his birthright and disrespectful of the family interests. Jacob takes advantage of his brother and sets the stage for major family conflict. Both fail to honor each other and honor their family. They will reap the consequences of their decisions for years to come.

As the family starts to come apart, perhaps Rebekah and Isaac regret the choices *they* made. Rebekah in particular failed to recognize the deeper truth of the oracle, that God prophesied both her sons would father great nations. Like Sarah before her, casting out Ishmael to secure Isaac's future, Rebekah favors Jacob based on the belief that God's blessing is a limited resource.

But this is simply not true! God promised blessings for Ishmael *and* Isaac; likewise, God promised blessings for Esau *and* Jacob. Esau was set to inherit the birthright, but Jacob was set to inherit the covenant that God made with Abraham. Through him the line of Israel would descend. This was already predetermined by God. Nothing Isaac or Rebekah, Jacob or Esau, did could change that.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UO2A2p-19A>

God's knowledge of our choices and behavior is not absolute; God allows for our free will. But what *is* absolute is God's covenant plan for humanity. God's eyes are on the long game. God's will may be temporarily frustrated by our sin, but God's way into the future cannot ultimately be stymied. God will be faithful to His promises; that is never in doubt. It is God's grace, not human sin, that will win out.

Often the conflict in our relationships, family or otherwise, is driven by a scarcity mindset, that God's blessings are limited. This mindset makes us jealous and has us competing against each other for God's blessing. But blessing for you does not mean less blessing for me. The blessings may be different, but "We know that God works all things together for good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28 CEB).

As followers of Jesus we have already secured our eternal inheritance. Paul writes this in his letter to the Ephesians (Chapter 1, The Message):

1-9 How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

7-10 ...He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

11-12 It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

13-14 It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first

installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

This is the promise on which our faith ought to rest. When we covet what other people have; when we are tempted to believe that might is right, that the strong and clever will inherit the earth; when we grasp after power, control, and entitlement – the Spirit calls us back to the truth: *Our* birthright is the birthright of grace – bought, signed, sealed, and delivered by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our eternal inheritance has been predestined for us. Nothing can ever change that.

Jesus offers us a different way of being in the world – a way of abundance, not scarcity; a way of trust, not manipulation – because Jesus has made a way for God's covenant blessing to extend to all people. We are not in competition with each other. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live a life that leans into God's covenant promises. And when we lean into those promises, we are freed to live a life that bears the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

Let us choose to embody these qualities in all our relationships, for our sakes and for the next generation's sake, too.

Amen.