

Text: Genesis 25: 19-34  
Title: The Brothers  
Date: 07.13.08  
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Since the beginning of time brothers have fought. Since Cain invited Abel out to a field, fraternal rivalry is firmly affixed in the natural order of this fallen world.

So, in some ways it was just a typical morning, in the winter of 1977 on the frozen tundra of northwest Iowa, when my brother wouldn't let me into the bathroom.

My mother gave birth to two boys. The older one ~ stronger, stouter, and with a thicker head of hair ~ cared about sports, girls, and the trivial pursuit of some elusive cool. The younger one ~ slender, shy, and smooth of skin ~ cared about learning how things worked, and building things, and fixing things. While the older was ignorant of the way of tools. The younger was restoring exotic European sports cars, and building bikes, and fixing televisions that the local repair shop discarded.

But, on this particular morning the younger brother wouldn't let the older brother in the bathroom.

I was a high school senior with a curly-bouffant-Greg-Brady-hairdo that needed tending to; my brother wouldn't unlock the door. So, I pounded, demanded, and threatened. I pressed my face right up to the door jam and hissed the trouble that awaited him if he didn't open up. Suddenly the door fell open, a fist flew, and before I could duck, defend, or deflect my younger brother's fist ~ carrying years and years of frustration ~ landed square on my mouth.

For a moment we were both stunned. We fought regularly but we didn't hit in the face. I touched my split-wide-open-bloody-lip. My brother, with the blood draining from his face, realized the error of his ways and backed into a corner in the bathroom. I followed him and pummeled his back until he cried like a little school girl. Some measure of natural order was restored, but I was embarrassed to explain that my sophomore brother had split my senior lip.

Since the beginning of time brothers have fought.  
Fraternal rivalry is firmly affixed in the natural order of this fallen world.

Our text this morning tells the story of that natural order. Brothers battle, the strong survive, and to the victor goes the spoils. Jacob supplants Esau, Cain kills Abel; Genesis is full of primal stories about the elemental way of the world.

But, I would suggest that even as our text gives a picture of a broken world, it also gives a picture of the way of God. While our text may be short on practical application and long on human frailty and family dysfunction, can we also read it as a snapshot of the way of God?

Rebekah had a tussle going on her womb. Although she had been barren for a long time, her problem was not infertility but infighting. Eventually the gestational jostling got so bad that she asked:

*If it is thus, why do I live? (RSV)*

Perplexed by this uterine struggle, she inquired of God, who responded:

*... one will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger.*

And just like God turns the way of the world upside down!

Without explanation or exhortation,  
without rationale or recourse,  
without expectation or justification,  
God reverses the order of the world.  
God turns a culture of primogeniture on its head.

*The right of inheritance belongs to eldest son*

Against all conventional wisdom about the way things work, God announces that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Esau isn't judged and found wanting. Jacob isn't assessed and counted faithful. But, in an expression of divine freedom God flips everything over.

That is not to suggest that God blesses or signs off on Jacob's tactics, or that with a nudge and a wink God turns his back on Jacob's flaws. That is not to suggest that God thought Esau was too dim a bulb to shine the light of love. That is to suggest that this reversal says something of the way of God, who, to quote I Corinthians,

*...chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,  
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,  
God chose what is low and despised in the world,  
even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,  
so that no human being can boast in the presence of God.*

*I Corinthians 1:27-29*

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann refers to this flip-flop as an "oracle of inversion." It is another hint that the powers of this world of

hierarchy,  
birth order,  
muscle,  
nationality,  
gender,  
race,  
and religiosity,  
don't fit God's scheme of things.

So, in one way this text is not at all about bickering brothers, but it is about God inverting the natural order.

Eventually the oracle comes true and during the time of David the Israelites subjugate the Edomites. The line of Jacob rules the line of Esau. And, trust me every time I have to ask my brother's help to fix a bike or repair a car ~ I am reminded that the older serves the younger.

But! This is not just simple prophecy about who finally gets the upper hand. There is also here an early hint of a scandalous God.

This is not a God who gives on the basis of merit.

This is not a God who shuns the prodigal and embraces the one who stays at home.

This is not a God who rewards hard work and clean living.

This is not a God of some fundamental fairness.

But! This is a God of a sovereign and capricious will

who becomes one of us,

and sits with outsiders,

and befriends outcasts,

and loves sinners,

and is nailed to a cross between two criminals.

The natural order is turned upside down.

The scandal of Jacob and Esau is the scandal of God.

You know, there is something remarkably human about this text.

Frederick Buechner imagines it this way:

*Esau was older than I by one grunt and couple of squeals less from Rebekah as she squatted on the birthstones in the women's tent while Laughter (Isaac) swayed back and forth wringing his hands outside...*

*There were others who later on whispered that they called him Esau because it sounded somewhere between Heehaw and Seesaw and was thus just the right name for that braying, simple-minded man who was up one moment and down the next...*

It is a delightful text. One boy is ruddy and one is grabbing a heel.

*By the way, the only other person in the Old Testament for whom this word for a reddish color is used is David*

This text is earthy, conflicted, ambiguous, and morally messy, but it is also the arena where God works out his will. Even in the slop and surliness of humanity, even in this world of strife, even where brother struggles against brother, God puts his hands in the soil and get dirt under his nails. God chooses a cheat to carry the covenant.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is about God's promises prevailing in barrenness. But, the Jacob story is about God's promises moving to fulfillment in the midst of a murky messy world, where none of the characters are without blemish. They cheat, steal, deceive, plot, trick, lie, and lie with the neighbor's wife....

And, yet these are the very people with whom God chooses to become entangled, these are the very people to whom God gives his promise.

And, if God works out his purposes even with the conniving and clumsy, than there is hope for you and me. That is not excuse or license for sinfulness and sloth, but it is good news that the way of God is not only through "faith heroes" and "prayer warriors" but God is also entangled

with those who have clay feet and weak knees,  
with cowards and clowns,  
with scoundrels and swindlers,  
with rascals and rascallions,  
with even me and you.

So, you are invited to the table this morning not because of beauty, birth order, strength, or character. You are invited to the table this morning not because you deserve it. You are invited to the table because God would turn over the way of the world, and God would make his through a flawed and fallen humanity.

Paul writes about this way:

*...before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad –  
in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him  
who calls – she was told "The younger will serve the older." Just as it is written:  
"Jacob have I loved, but Esau I hated."*

*What then shall we say?  
Is God unjust?*

*Not at all! For he says to Moses,  
I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
And I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*

*It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.  
Romans 9: 11-16*

You are invited to the table because God's way is the way of mercy.  
Amen.