“A House Divided”

Rev. Greg Watling

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Text: Genesis 25: 19-34

I don’t know about you, but I grew up knowing there was a certain order to things. Birth order was one of them. In my family growing up (and even some now) there were many jokes about birth order, especially between my brother and me. My sister is the oldest, my brother the middle child and I was an am still the baby of the family. Whether they thought I was spoiled, or I thought they got to have everything, we argued about things. We do that much less now, as it’s become a joke, but there still are some remnants of the oldest knows better, they should oversee things, and so on, even from my parents. It’s all quite unintentional, but exists, nonetheless. Maybe you experienced some of this while you were growing up, or still do! But I don’t think anyone I know struggled to the level of Jacob and Esau. Maybe you know the story? I remembered learning it in Sunday School, and forming my opinion that Esau was tricked (which he was), but also that Jacob was a bad guy (which is less true). I never quite understood why God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, until much later in life, but I was never quite sure that was the right title for God. It didn’t fit my orderly world. And folks, in this story, God is tampering (according to Walter Brueggemann) with the fundamental conviction of society. This story should make us uncomfortable, especially while the nation is wrestling with the questions it is today. Interesting that Jacob and Esau begin their life wrestling with one another over position.

For all that happens in this story, the pivotal scripture in the whole thing is the oracle of verse 23:

And the Lord said to [Rebekah], “the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”

That is not the way the ancient near-east worked. It was long-established history that the eldest was the prized child and the younger was closer to low and despised. According to Brueggemann, the meaning of the younger in the Bible is that he is the one without rights on his side. Others included in such a place in life include the widow, the orphaned and the sojourner (see Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:21; 26:12; Psalm 146:9). In the New Testament, these people are identified with the “publicans and the sinners” of Matthew’s gospel (9: 10-13, 11: 16-19, 21:32). The point is, there was what many would call a “God-ordained order” to things and no one better mess with that. The problem is the one messing with the pre-ordained order of things is God. God chooses Jacob over Esau and it should disrupt your sensibilities about how things have always been. How could God mess the with so-called “natural order” f things? Other than acknowledging that God is completely free, I guess the answer is “because God wants to”! Jesus continues this “messing with the order” when he tells us the last shall be first and the first shall be last in three of the four New Testament gospels. Even further, the Apostle Paul tells us, “God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing things that are.” We love some of those scriptures and feel ourselves the chosen ones, but reality makes we wonder who really are the last, the least and the lost? Am I in that group? No, I don’t think so. So, does that mean I’m despised by God? No, that’s not true either.

Esau is never condemned in our story. He never loses the things that give him comfort and strength. Sure, he got tricked, and taken advantage of by Jacob. His name isn’t as famous as his trickster brother. It would seem that Jacob got so much more than Esau, but I ask, is that true? Did Esau lose everything? I think not. Just because someone else gets something, doesn’t mean I lose everything. Conflict will dominate the narrative of these two brothers, and it will involve their parents choosing sides. You might even call it Civil War in some ways, with brother against brother, but the truth is that God is at work even when it seems that everything we ever counted on is up for grabs.

For majority culture people like me, this story forces me to wonder where I got my rights and my privileges from? Were they because of where I was born? Is it because of the finances we had growing up? Did I get my rights because of my race, which really is an accident of birth, just like being born second or third? Did I get my rights because of my gender as male? That, too, is an accident of birth and beyond my control. I got an education and heck, I’m a pastor, did that give me more authority, honor and “places of privilege at the table”? If I make room for another at that place, which, by the way, Jesus flat-out instructed us to do, asking us to sit at the other end of the table from the place of honor. We’re all fighting over who gets what and from whom, but we never ask the question why to do some people have things and some don’t? Did we all start out equal and some just got farther as the “race” of life went on? Did anyone get a head start? Are we entitled to certain things because of where, when and to whom we were born?

All social convention leads to Esau having been the brother of the promise. Our God, by all rights, should be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau, but that’s not the way it is. Do people have to wrestle one another and trick one another and … well, do other things … to take their place in the world? I’ll always struggle with the idea that Jacob tricked his brother to get the birth right, but I have to admit that this story fits much more with the God of the Bible that I know, the one who leaves the ninety-nine for the one. Scripture never tells us that the ninety-nine are forsaken or lost, or slaughtered, or denied, it only says that this God cares about the last, the least, the lost, the left-out, the uncared for, the unheard, and the unincluded. You can choose not to like it, but serious scripture study tells us repeatedly that just because social convention works a certain way, doesn’t mean that it’s God’s way. It also means that when someone else gets something, that does not mean that you or I no longer matter or are no longer members of the household of God. It means that God often operates the opposite way that we do, and we must struggle…wrestle…with that notion.

Walter Brueggemann ends his commentary on this narrative in this way

The narrative does not accommodate our discreet sensibilities. It is without guile or apology. It does not waver from the exasperation of Rebekah (v22). It does not apologize for the partisan character of the oracle of verse 23. It is not even embarrassed by (nor does it bother to explain) the blatant preference of the parents in verse 28. Like its main character, this narrative is indiscreet and at times scandalous. It shows God and his chosen younger one aligned against the older brother, against the father, and against the cultural presumptions of natural privilege. Jacob is announced as a visible expression of God’s remarkable graciousness in the face of conventional definitions of reality and prosperity. Jacob is a scandal from the beginning. The powerful grace of God is a scandal. It upsets the way we would organize life.

Knowing this, what you do think God is up to right now in this world and in this nation? Is it the complete chaos of pandemic and protest? Is there something that we are supposed to hear from what is happening around us? Is it all about if you get something, I lose? Does our language matter? Do our social conventions need be reconsidered from a different perspective than the one we’ve always known? Does my Sunday school notion of Jacob as somehow a bad guy really play out in the story of Genesis, or is it the lens by which I’ve been taught to read it? Maybe my lenses need changing? Maybe I need to get the log out of my own eye to help you remove the speck from yours? Maybe I need to listen for the still small voice of God that says, “Friend, you’re missing something here.” Our world doesn’t have to be an either/or world. We can be a both/and world where you and I and the one I don’t understand can all be welcome at the great banquet table of the prophet Isaiah, but instead of fighting over who gets the best seat, we’ll bring a chair out for that brother or that sister that we don’t understand, or maybe we don’t even like. I may never like Jacob. That’s not the point. God is disruptive. God challenges every social convention. God calls us out of every comfort zone into a place where our only comfort is not our tradition or our place, but our comfort is the God who is at work in ways we’ll never understand and maybe not ever like. Maybe God will love someone we refuse to. Maybe God will love us while we sit under a tree and complain that God didn’t do things our way like Jonah did? Maybe we’ll one day seriously consider the question of “where were you when I made the world” like Job did?

I think it’s time that we get out of our camps hurling insults at the other side (boy, we have so many other sides, don’t we?) and instead look for ways to bless those who curse us, be merciful to those who hate us, and ultimately love those that God loves, and quit being so self-protective. It will take time. We need community to do it. We need to challenge ourselves to see the world as God does. And in my case, that means I need to quit looking from the top and see life from the margins. It’s time for me to change. It’s time for me to take a different approach. It’s time for me to seek to understand, why Jacob? It’s so easy to classify another as the bad person. It’s so much harder to ask ourselves to make a change within ourselves and in our own actions in the world.

I have so much more that I want to say, but let’s leave it at this for today, “God loves you and God loves me, but God also loves the he, the she, and the they that I cannot yet see.”

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.