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Genesis 25:19-34
Parts of Genesis 27, Genesis 33

“Get a Grip”

Were any of you surprised at the Casey Anthony verdict? I was, too. I didn't watch the trial but I did get a daily synopsis of what was happening in the trial on the Today Show. The level of dysfunction in the family is amazing; not reporting a daughter missing for 301days, a mother who commits perjury for her daughter; accusations of he said/she said; it just doesn't get much better.

Only on TV . . .and in the Bible (!) do we get such larger than life stories of dysfunctional families.

We're in the 4th week of my series on stories from the Bible everyone should know. We started with the story of creation, where we learned that God calls us to continue the work of creation by building a world that gives people hope; we then heard the story of the call of Abraham, the first patriarch, and learned we need to put our trust in God. Last week we heard the very difficult story of Abraham's near fatal sacrifice of Isaac, and learned that God can and will ask us to make sacrifices.

Today the story gets more personal, less abstract. When we enter Genesis today, Abraham is dead, Isaac is forty years old and married to Rebecca, and becomes a father to twins Esau and Jacob. Someone once said that there are only a few really good stories, and in one way or another they appear in every age, written in the idiom of the time. A reviewer of novels once noted that, “One of the oldest and best stories in human history is a simple narrative of betrayal and revenge, and it gets even better when it happens in a family.” And so it is that the past few weeks the story of the Anthony family's dysfunction riveted us on TV, and thousands and thousands of years before that the story of Isaac, Rebecca, and their twin sons Esau and Jacob riveted people sitting around a campfire.

Esau and Jacob's rivalry spans 8 chapters of the Bible; the part we heard today is only the beginning of this intense sibling rivalry that began in their mother's womb. Esau is technically the older brother since he was born first. He came out all red and hairy with Jacob gripping his heel. Esau was a skillful hunter and a man of the field. He wasn't one to mince words. He got straight to the point. He was probably the type of person with whom you always knew where you stood, and my guess is he was a man's man. He was his father's favorite.

Jacob was the exact opposite. He was quiet and kept to himself. He was comfortable in a woman's world, which was maybe why his mother favored him. He was adept and quick on his feet and very shrewd.

Those of us who have children know that just because they share the same gene pool doesn't mean they share the same personalities. My children are all different as different can be, and I swear they were born that way. How about your children? Ask any of the older 3 about going to my ultrasound for Charlotte and seeing her in utero like this, fist up in the air, and I swear that was a sign of things to come . . .because that sweet little girl can be obstinate when she wants to be! I know that environmental factors have a lot to do with how we turn out, but sometimes we're just born a certain way, know what I mean? It is so clear to Terry and me that each of our children was born with his or her own personality, and that individual personality manifests itself uniquely every single day, even from a very young age.

And so it was with Jacob and Esau, too.

I once bought a door hanger for my brother-in-law that said "Friends welcome, relatives by appointment" that reminds me of Esau and Jacob's relationship. Had they not been related, they would never have been friends.

I asked my resident experts about their experiences of being an older and younger brother, with the understanding that anything they said could and would be used in my sermon. From the older brother I learned that he has a better chance of earning more money, the younger brother looks up to him (something the younger brother dismissed), that you can boss around the younger brother, but sometimes they ignore you, and that he hears a lot from his parents, "Henry, can you help with this. Henry, can you help with that."

From the younger brother I learned that Henry earns more money, that Henry has more privileges, that Mom and Dad are more likely to believe the younger brother (this came from Henry but was not disputed by Tommy), and that the younger one doesn't have to do as much work. But as Tommy pointed out at the end, he still has Julia and Charlotte to boss around, so he's still an older brother.

I thought it was interesting that they shared some of the same sentiments. There's a certain logic to their sentiments that make sense to them, like the fact that Henry has certain privileges because he's older, but he also has more responsibility. In this way their world is very ordered; they assume that what one gets or doesn't get, it will be the same for them. Henry got a phone in middle school, so I'll get a phone in middle school. Henry gets to stay up late in Middle School, so I'll get to stay up late. Henry got to choose what color he wanted his room painted in Middle School, so I'll get to choose what color I want my room painted. Everything is very fair and orderly.

The problem is, that life doesn't always work this way. Now, in the examples I gave they do, but as I'm constantly reminding them, just because I get Charlotte something in Dollar Tree doesn't mean I'm stopping at QT for you (this is the latest bone of contention in the "but it's not fair category".) In fact, I find that the

further on down the line we get, the less “fair” life is. Truth be told, Charlotte hasn’t gone to bed much earlier this summer than any of the others have because we’re up and about doing stuff, but when Henry was that age he was in bed early like clock work. The orderly, enforced world in which we raised Henry and Tommy is getting a loose around the edges.

Now, I know a little something about this since I’m the youngest in the family. To this day my older brother will get rankled by the fact that Mom and Dad bought me a car when he had to buy his own, never mind the fact that it was a 79 Citation that I shared with Margaret and it only cost \$700. The point is that I was given that car when he had to work to buy his. And even though he’s only partially kidding around about it, it disrupted my brother’s view of how the world is supposed to operate in an orderly and fair fashion. And my parents didn’t help matters much when they bought me my next car, which I always point out to him was a baby blue Ford Tempo! “It was a nice car!” He says. “It was a light blue Ford Tempo. You’re 55 and I’m 40-get over it!” Get a grip, that’s life!

Yes, I can totally understand why Jacob was gripping his older brother’s foot. Just you wait and see, he seemed to be saying. I’m gonna get that birthright and all the privileges that will come with it! And Dad’s blessing, too! Which he secures in a later chapter by tricking and conniving dear old Dad.

But the hard lesson for the older siblings among us, is that in this story Jacob doesn’t choose to be God’s favored one, God chooses Jacob to be the favored one. But the problem is, that’s now how the world was supposed to work. The younger served the older; the older gets to boss around the younger, not vice-verse. God messed around with how things are supposed to be. Shook things up a bit. Didn’t seem to care that society said Esau should be the favored one because he’s the oldest, didn’t seem to care that all of the privileges should go to Esau, or that everything should be fair and equal. God just messed up the whole fairness thing and said, nope, Jacob will be stronger and the master.

Which caused the younger siblings in my house to cheer! But Jacob is not a role model; he’s a conniver and a cheat. He bribed Esau out of his birthright with a bowl of bean soup, and later he’ll blatantly cheat him out of their father’s blessing. God definitely didn’t choose Jacob because he was a man of integrity. Far from it. No, God chose Jacob to be the heir apparent because that’s who God is. It’s a baseless choice that probably doesn’t make any sense to us given Jacob’s less than moral character, but that’s how God operates-outside the boundaries of what seems prudent and just, because God isn’t just, God is merciful. And in this story, God chooses to show mercy to Jacob, even though he’s a louse. Which doesn’t strike us fair, even if we are the younger brother. Because that’s not how the world is supposed to operate. Louses shouldn’t be blessed by God. If I’m a hard worker, like Esau was, I should be treated accordingly. If I’m a cheat, like Jacob, I should be treated accordingly. If I’m an upstanding citizen and my younger brother or sister or neighbor (for that matter) isn’t, it matters. Issues of equity and fair treatment matter. We want a fair accounting, whether

it's taxing or fair distribution of food or the treatment of our children in school. Counting, accounting, equity, and issues of fair treatment matter. Really matter.

But God doesn't work this way, as unfair and unjust as that may seem. God works in a much better way. In God's world relationships aren't based on who did what for whom, they're based on God's love, which is a love that loves the sinner as much as the saint. Luckily for us, God's love isn't based on who we are or what he did or didn't do or how good we've been or how bad we've been, God loves us just because that's who God is.

Had we written the story of Jacob and Esau, the ending would be much different. The brothers I know may have had Esau giving Jacob a good kick in the you-know-what for all the conniving he endured. But that's not how their story ends. The story ends in an embrace. After all the cheating and conniving and death threats, their story ends in an embrace. Esau runs to meet Jacob, throws his arms around him and kisses him. It's the last thing Jacob expected from his spurned older brother. In fact, it's so unexpected that Jacob shows up for the meeting with 400 of his finest soldiers to keep Esau at arm's length.

But he doesn't need them. And when he tries to offer them all to Esau, Esau says he has everything he needs. To which Jacob replies, in his finest moment, "Seeing you is like seeing the face of God." And indeed it is, because no matter what we've done or who we are, God runs to embrace us.

Which isn't fair. It's better than fair.

Amen.