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“Family Ties”
Genesis 25:19-34

As I’ve mentioned on numerous occasions, I am what is known as a ‘lectionary preacher.’ I choose the Scripture(s) for the sermon from the weekly selection of passages found in the “Revised Common Lectionary.” This week I was faced with a particularly quandary because I felt very strongly about the importance of preaching on TWO of them... ones that were VERY different. The one that I just read, from Genesis 25, deals with **parents**, and the **growth of family**... the other, from Matthew 13, is a parable on the **growth of faith**... particularly with regards to understanding God’s Word. So, you could say that they both do share in common the notions of **seeds**, and **roots**. And because of the importance of both passages, I am going to do something unique: NO, not preach 2 sermons today! (Had you worried, George?) But rather, preach on this week’s Gospel reading NEXT week. For I think that it speaks clearly to how to better understand... and grow the ‘seeds’... of this Christian faith of ours. A faith that is ‘rooted’ in God’s Word. So I hope I’ve ‘sown some seeds’ for next week...

That being said, this week’s OT passage from Genesis also helps us to understand the ‘roots’ of our faith... from those earliest followers of God who labored in their faith under the terms of the old covenant of **works**. By trying to live by God’s Laws, to obey his commands. Imperfect people trying to live up to God’s perfect will. And we all know how well THAT works out...

As those same ‘imperfect people’, however... who recognize that we are saved by God’s **grace**, NOT by our **works**... we can learn much about ourselves by looking at the people of the Old Testament... the old Covenant. For our history of faith in God is very much ‘rooted’ in the stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Sara and Rebekah, of Jacob and Esau. The manner in which we live out our faith in the context of family is very much related to this story we have read this morning. Today’s message is about **family ties**... both physical family, and spiritual family.

One of the most compelling reasons to continually consider the stories of the O.T. (besides, of course, the most important one: Jesus said to... **“I have come to fulfill the Law and the prophets, not to abolish them”**) is that there is a depth to the relationships in the Hebrew Scriptures: both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’... man-to-man and man-to-God. Stories that explore why we are who we

are. Why we behave the way we do. Our **history**. Our **human nature**. Our **Heredity**. Our **habits**. All of these affect how we relate to one another... and to our Lord God.

One fascinating aspect of this story is how it speaks to **HISTORY**. When the Lord spoke to Rebekah and said that there were ***“two nations are in your womb; two different (‘divided’) peoples will emerge from your body,”*** she had little idea of what God was talking about. The first born, Esau... who would later be known as ‘Edom’... would later establish the land by the same name, and lead the people known as the ‘Edomites.’ A nation we now know as **Jordan**. His younger twin brother, Jacob, would also later receive a new name: **Israel**. Of course, to this day, the countries that bear those two names still bear those characteristics: two very ‘different,’ ‘divided’ peoples. The roots of conflict in today’s Middle East come from ‘seeds’ sown in the times of Abraham and Isaac.

And in case you’re wondering how this Middle Eastern history applies to us Christians, here’s one little morsel of trivia for you: You may recall a ruler at the time of Jesus named **Herod**. Well, his family tree has its roots in those ancient people known as the... *Edomites!* What a web God weaves, eh?

Besides the **history** that this passage imparts, it also speaks to our **human nature**. One of my favorite parts of this passage... or, at least, the one that seemed to be the most REAL... comes after Rebekah becomes pregnant. When here twins begin to ***“push against each other inside of her,”*** what does she say? ***“If this is what it’s like, why did it happen to me?!”*** (*Genesis 25:22*) MOMS... even for the majority of you who had single pregnancies... can you not relate? As much as you loved the ‘end product’ (well, at least most of the time...), weren’t there those times when you thought to yourself, or expressed aloud, *‘If this is what it’s like, WHY did it happen to me?!’* Rebekah’s statement is about as REAL as it gets...

The most amusing part of this story for me... and one that is also pretty ‘real’... is when Esau comes in from the field. And, naturally, hungry. And what does he say? ***“I’m starving! Let me devour some of this ‘red stuff.’”*** (*Genesis 25:30*) (First of all, ‘RED STUFF’? Really? Obviously Esau was a man of few words... and/or, limited vocabulary. ☺) But as for that ‘starving’ part, was he just taking a little liberty with the meaning of that word? I mean, haven’t we all exaggerated the truth just a bit with the use of extreme language. (Like, ‘Oh, that chocolate dessert from “La Truffe Sauva” is to DIE for.’ Really? Is ANY food really to DIE for?)

But what does he follow up the 'starving' comment with? **"I'm going to DIE..."** (Genesis 25:32) (and in case you're wondering about the translation issue, most of the other versions say **"I'm about to die!"** 'My death is imminent!') How many of you think that he was truly 'about to die?' Maybe he was stretching the truth just a 'WEE' bit? But then again, can we ALL be given to a little 'hyperbole' once in a while...?

The real issue is not, however, whether or not he was guilty of gross exaggeration... but moreover, what he was willing to give up in exchange for his real/imagined need. His **"birthright."** Just what IS that? Not a term we use too much in our modern vernacular... particularly with regards to children. But in ancient cultures, there were certain 'rights of birth' accorded to the first born. Honored positions of respect at the dinner table. Primary roles as the family protector, provider, leader. But most significantly, the preference with regard to **inheritance**. In this culture, upon his death a father's estate would be divided by the number of sons, and the firstborn would receive 2 of those portions. If there were only two sons, then the eldest would receive both 'shares,' and the youngest NONE. Soooo... in the case of Esau and Jacob, unless another miracle birth came along, Esau would stand to gain NOTHING upon his father's passing. Now, while I know that men have been accused of 'thinking with their stomachs,' this is a BIT ridiculous! Was he really thinking about all that he stood to lose by satisfying the cravings of his physical body... or was he thinking at ALL? I guess that the last verse answers that question: **"He ate, drank, got up, and left, showing just how little he thought of his birthright."** (Genesis 25:34)

Which brings me to this final consideration of our human nature, and its relationship to our 'family ties'... both our ties in the 'nuclear' family, as well as the larger family of God. How was it that Esau could come to think so little of 'family ties,' while Jacob would think so highly of his status in the family that he would even 'connive' to better that position? How were the two so different in nature... was it a matter of **heredity?** Or of **habits?** The way they were **born...** or **raised?** Putting it another way, did Jacob and Esau turn out the way they were because of '**Nature or nurture?**'

I pose this question not merely to explore why one brother became **"an outdoorsman who knew how to hunt,"** while the other became **"a quiet man who stayed at home."** (Genesis 25:27) More than their character traits, this is about their spiritual traits. For if Esau could show such disregard for the legacy he would be left by his **earthly father**, what does that say about his relationship with his **heavenly Father?** What is it that made Jacob so concerned about the privileges associated with one's **physical birth...** and would that not also affect his regard for those

benefits associated with one's **spiritual birth**? Were those attitudes a matter of **heredity**, or of **habits**... simply the way they were **born**, or how they were **raised**... a matter of '**nature** or **nurture**'?

If we take God's comments to Rebekah at face value, we could conclude that it was the former: ***"Two nations are in your womb; two different ('divided') peoples will emerge from your body. One people will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger."*** (Genesis 25:23) Clearly, from their conception, Jacob and Esau were to be quite different from one another; one stronger, one weaker; one subservient to the other. A Sovereign God said so..

That being said, we also read earlier of a wife who, by all appearances, was destined by that same Sovereign God to be unable to even HAVE children. To be, in the language of the day, ***"Barren."*** (Remember another prominent place where this expression was used? With Abraham's wife, Sara. Hmm...and how did THAT turn out?) So what happened with Rebekah? ***"Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife... (and) the Lord was moved by his prayer... and Rebekah became pregnant."*** (Genesis 25:21)

So, this would say that what might look to be a matter of **heredity**... the way that one was **born**... was in truth affected by a **habit**...altered by prayers that were **raised** up. This should serve as an example to us all of the importance of our prayer life. That there is great power in prayer... the notion that Almighty God might indeed be '**moved**' by our petitions. AND, further, that we must practice that power on those closest to us: wives, husbands, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings. As valuable as it is to pray for our friends at church and in the community, for those hurting in our country and in our world, we must be careful not to overlook those closest to us... with 'family ties'...

And it is the value of those most intimate relationships that made one particular verse in this passage jump off of the page: ***"Isaac loved Esau... but Rebekah loved Jacob."*** (Genesis 25:28) Dad loved the outdoorsy, macho game hunter who provided him with good venison stew, and Mom loved the one who spent time around the house, talking about HGTV and the Food Network. OK, I get that in any family dynamic, there will be those similar personalities that we more naturally gravitate toward. But as I read this verse, I guess that I felt led to add a parenthetical phrase to each parental one: (*'at the expense of the other brother'*). Esau could have borrowed from a famous line from the old variety show, "The Smothers Brothers": ***"Mom always loved you best."***

Perhaps it was that favoritism, that division, that he saw between his human parents that caused Esau to have such disregard for his 'birthright'... those privileges associated with being a part

of the family. Sometimes it is such disharmony in modern families that can cause the children to deny those privileges associated with being a part of that human family. And, sometimes, to deny their association with the larger family of God. How a child is 'nurtured' greatly impacts their 'nature' as an adult.

As many of you know, Barrie and I were on vacation last week with part of our family. [(And since some couldn't be there, in fairness to all, here's a picture from our previous family gathering) And in spending the better part of a week in close quarters with both children and grandchildren, I have come to appreciate the value... and yes, the differences... in family members. But that no matter what, I am to embrace those differences, to appreciate them, and to love each one of my family equally. With no favoritism, no partiality. Just as God loves each one of us... for in Paul's words, ***"God shows not favoritism (partiality)"*** (Romans 2:11) By demonstrating the unconditional love of Christ to those closest to us, we point them to a God whose love is far greater than ours could ever be.

For as important as our earthly family ties are, the MOST important family ties we have is with our heavenly family: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And that the 'birthright' that we must never take for granted, must always think MOST highly of, are those privileges associated with our 'rebirth' as believers in Jesus Christ. For unlike Esau's 'red stuff,' which he thought would keep him alive, it is the 'red stuff' of Jesus... his shed blood... that will truly give us LIFE. Blessed be THAT 'family tie' that will bind our hearts in love... into eternity.