

Scripture: Genesis 25:19-34
Grace That Can't Be Measured
The Rev. Tom Hagood
Sunday, July 10, 2011

I've often wondered if God really knew what would happen to the rest of us when our Creator kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden. It was like God flicked that first domino and started a chain reaction. I mean, seriously ... just one generation later the couple's first-born son Cain kills his brother Abel all because God shows a little favoritism for Abel's offering and doesn't seem to care for Cain's offering.

Reminds me of the old line from the Smother's Brothers where Tommy whines to his brother Dick ... "Mom always liked you best." Now I really don't know why God did that ... but if you read the text from Genesis ... before Cain does his evil deed ... God does at least encourage him to do better the next time.

But it doesn't seem to matter. Cain is still mad and nothing ... not even a word from the Creator of the Universe ... seems to make any difference. And so ... he murders his brother. And on it goes. On and on and on ... family after family ... generation after generation ... each carrying some of the ugly baggage from their past ... to share with each new generation yet to be.

Now some of you understand precisely what I'm talking about. You are fully aware of your family dynamics ... both the healthy and the dysfunctional ... and you probably work hard to reduce the bad and encourage the good. It takes work ... but that hard work also makes life a bit easier on the next generation coming along.

And then there are others of us who would rather not open that can of worms ... it might be too painful to relive those kinds of painful memories that have been burned into your soul ... or you might live in a world of denial or a world of shame that keeps dark family secrets locked up behind the closed doors of our minds. After all ... it's often a lot easier to stand behind a wall of denial than it is to share the truth that lies within our hearts.

Now I'm not condemning anyone who tightly holds on to the dark secrets of their life ... a life that may have been hurt because of parental favoritism or mental or physical abuse or even neglect. That's often how people survive the traumas of life.

But what I hope you will hear in our reading and my words this morning is some grace ... grace that is found in the most unlikely of places ... grace that only comes from God who does love all of us ... unconditionally ... without favoritism ... not matter how we might feel about our Creator's love for us.

So listen with me now to a story about a dysfunctional family from the Hebrew scriptures ... Genesis ... Chapter 25 ... verses 19-34. May God open all of our hearts to these words. Out of respect for the word of the Lord, those who are able, please stand for the reading. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

25:19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,

25:20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

25:21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

25:22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

25:23 And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

25:24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.

25:25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.

25:26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

25:27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.

25:28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

25:29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished.

25:30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.)

25:31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."

25:32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

25:33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

25:34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Often a story with two characters will portray one with a white hat and one in a black hat. One

will be the hero ... the other the villain. But not so in this story ... there are no heroes ... no good guys ... just two brothers who can't seem to stand each other. And tucked into this story is an admission of favoritism by both parents ... Isaac, the son of the patriarch of the Hebrew people ... favors Esau. Esau ... the robust hunter who might one day grow up to be a middle linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. Dad's proud of his boy ... because Esau likes the things his father likes. So they spend a lot of time playing catch and fishing together and doing things that sons and dads are supposed to do. Right?

But Jacob is not like his brother. He's the studious one. The quiet one. The one who likes to think. He spends his days in the tent reading books and writing poetry and learning to cook under the loving and watchful eye of his mother. There is a wonderful bond between son and mother ... and I suspect that that bond fills in a dark void that each has learned to bear ... by a son who is ignored by his father ... and a mother who is emotionally detached from her husband. They need each other. And there you have the makings of a highly dysfunctional family.

You know what I really like about good Christians ... it's how we can see right into those kinds of family situations and so quickly size them up ... even making fun of them ... cracking all kinds of jokes about those crazy neighbors who live down the street ... or even better ... how we can so quickly judge and condemn a mixed up family because they aren't like us ... as if we good Christian folk live such perfect lives. You know what I mean.

Take a good look at the Cayce Anthony murder trial that's caught the attention of so many good Christians. Righteous anger has exploded as fingers are pointed at the Anthony family ... and, like Casey's ex-fiancé points out ... we are ready to agree that that family is the "carnival of all dysfunctional families." And we wonder ... all of us wonder ... what good will ever come out of this terrible event ... the death of an innocent little 3-year-old girl ... no matter how it happened ... no matter who is involved.

But the fact is ... no story about a single family is as simple as it first seems. There is so much dark stuff beneath the surface ... so much dirty baggage that is being carried. And we ... in all of our wisdom as good Christians ... claim to see it all ... and to pass judgment on others ... long before we're willing to open up our own dirty baggage and peek inside. But it happens all the time.

Look at our reading from Genesis ... We can blame Esau for the family's problems ... after all, he is so compulsive ... he can't control himself ... he doesn't really care about anything except for what is happening at the moment ... he's ready to sell his birthright for a bowl of chili. And Jacob ... now he's a conniver ... he is ready to trick his brother at the drop of a hat to get what he wants. But ... then we can also point the finger at Isaac and Rebekah because of their favoritism of one son over the other ... but this family story is far deeper than that ... much more complex ... it's a story that is comprised of many generations before ... and it still speaks to us today.

After all ... look back at the boys' grandfather ... Abraham. Talk about the patriarch of a dysfunctional family. Why would God want to establish a covenant with such a man in the first place? He's hardly what I'd call faithful to his covenant with his wife, Sarah. Oh sure, we can say that's just the way it was back then ... everybody had multiple partners ... but look what

results from the mess of his life. Do you really think this is the way God wanted it? You remember Abraham's first born ... Ishmael ... a son Abraham has with the slave Hagar ... well Abraham ends up kicking both of them out of the family all together. So much for stepping up to the bar and accepting your responsibilities.

And then ... in what is often an overlooked part of the Genesis story ... after the death of Sarah, Abraham marries a woman named Keturah ... and she gives birth to another six sons for Abraham. But he doesn't pay any attention to his new boys ... and ends up sending them all away to another country so that Isaac won't have to be around them. And on top of all that ... when Abraham finally dies ... he leaves everything to his favorite son, Isaac, and nothing to his other children.

OK, you might say ... that's just how people lived in those days. After all ... every man had a couple of concubines ... lots of children were born out of wedlock. Yes ... I agree with you ... but is that really how it was meant to be? Is this how healthy relationships were supposed to be shaped and forged within family groups ... is this the Godly model for how children would grow up ... by being ostracized by one or both parents ... sometimes abandoned ... sometimes even left to die? If anything ... Genesis is the planting of many dysfunctional seeds ... that seem to continue to bear much fruit today.

So I ask you ... why in the world would God choose such mixed up people ... such dysfunctional families ... to establish a covenant with? No wonder the world is so screwed up!

Then again ... I have to ask myself ... why would God want to have anything to do with me? Why would God want to pay any attention to my life in my little corner of the world? Why would God want to bless me after looking inside my dirty bag of goodies that I carry around with me ... year to year ... that I share with my own family?

You want to know why God still reaches out to me ... and why God is so interested in your life ... and why God chose an old man and old woman with all their faults to establish a covenant with ... quite simply ... it's called radical grace ... because God has established a covenant with all of us ... every single one of us ... both those we love and those we judge as not being worthy to receive it ...

All of us ... everyone ... are all being blessed by God with love and compassion and hope ... grace that can't even be measured because it's so far off the scale and so much more than I will ever merit in this life. And yet ... God just keeps pouring it on ... day after day ... even as broken as I am ... as sinful as I am ... as lost as I am ... as confused as I am ... even as depressed as I am ... or when I'm in great denial about the truth that lies within my heart ... there is God ... pouring the grace into my life ... calling me ... calling me to follow ... to turn around ... giving me the hope I long for ... to unload my luggage at the foot of the cross and then to pick up that empty bag ... freed to be what God calls me to be. I don't deserve that. But God gives it to me anyway.

And it doesn't matter who you are ... or what you've done in your life ... or where you are now ... or where you think you want to be tomorrow. ... God's grace can transform the worst situations ... the most dysfunctional lives ... into something that is new ... and renewed ... and beautiful to

behold.

The pure and simple truth is this ... without God's grace ... there would be no hope for Cayce Anthony ... and there would be hope for me, either. If we don't believe that God's grace can work through Abraham and Sarah ... or even through the Anthony family in all its turmoil ... then frankly, what hope do any of us have?

That might be worth considering ... even praying over ... as we prepare ourselves to come to this table in a few minutes ... to receive the greatest gift we will ever receive ... the grace of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

God! when human bonds are broken
and we lack the love or skill
To restore the hope of healing,
give us grace and make us still.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**