

## *Family Love*

Genesis 25:19-34

If you have been in worship over the summer months you know that, through the lectionary readings for this season, we have been hearing about the faith “family tree” of our biblical ancestors. It started with the call of Abram and Sarai, the marriage of their son Isaac to Rebekah, and this weeks reading is about their grandchildren Jacob and Esau. If you ever wondered about the possibility of any “black sheep” in any family tree, you don’t have to look far to find them. Who of us has cornered the market for craziness in our own family? It seems that broken families and dysfunctional families are everywhere. It reminds me of An Irish Mother’s Letter to her Son from Catch the Irish Laughter by Dave Abbott. It goes like this:

Dear Son,

Just a few lines to let you know that I’m still alive. I’m writing this letter slowly because I know you can’t read very quickly. You won’t know the house when you come home because we’ve moved.

About your father, he has a lovely job with 500 men under him - he’s cutting the grass at the cemetery. Your brother Sean is doing well in the Army. He’s only been a soldier for two weeks, and they’ve already made him a Court-Martial.

There was a washing machine in the new house when we moved, but it isn’t working too good; last week I put 14 shirts in it, pulled the chain and haven’t seen them since.

Mary your sister, has had her baby, but I don’t know whether it’s a boy or a girl, so I can’t tell you if you’re an aunt or an uncle.

Your Uncle Seamus drowned in a vat of whiskey in the brewery. Some of his work mates dived in to save him, but he fought them off bravely. We cremated his body, and it took four days to put the fire out.

It only rained twice last week, once for three days and once for four days. Monday was so windy that one chicken laid the same egg five times.

We had a letter from the undertaker. He said if the last instalment wasn't paid within seven days on your grandmother's funeral - up she comes!

*Your loving mother*

P.S. I was going to send you five pounds, but I've already sealed the envelope."

This weeks' family story is not quite that bad but begins with the line of Isaac. As I said earlier, last week we heard the story of how he and Rebekah met and got married. This week repeats Sarah's story with the problem of a barren woman. If you read ahead a bit we discover that they have been trying to have a child for 20 years because it says that Isaac was 40 when he got married and 60 when the miraculous birth occurs. It was a difficult labour for Rebekah and it got so rough at one point that she prays and has a consultation with God. The response from God is that "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."(25:23). The next verse gives the result: "When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau (which means "Red"). Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was name Jacob (which means *He takes by the heel* or *He supplants*). As with many bible stories their childhood is summed up with the simple words "When the boys grew up." We learn that Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Not sure what either of those descriptors means but that's all we get except for the fact that Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game (guided by his stomach here obviously) but Rebekah loved Jacob. So the tension is mounting and the inevitable clash between these two is laid out for us.

Jacob, being Rebekah's favourite, must have spent some time around the kitchen. He's got a stew simmering over the fire one day when Esau comes in from what must have been an unsuccessful hunt because he "was famished." Esau says to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" The text then adds that he earned a second name Edom, which also means "Red."

Jacob the supplanter says, "First sell me your birthright." Esau replies, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first," So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.

What's this all about?

According to the Bible dictionary birthright was the right of the first-born. While all a man's sons had his protection and some benefits, the First-Born son had a special inheritance. He was entitled by law and custom to receive twice as much as a younger son's portion and to be regarded in due time as the head of the family. His was the principal inheritance of property and name. Through him the family line was continued. The stories of Jacob's appropriation of Esau's birthright as the first born are important to the narrative, for it shows us how Jacob rather than his brother, continues the line of Abraham/Sarah and Isaac/Rebekah.

This is the stuff of family histories. We all have those moments in our family's life that we do not want to air publicly. We look at other families and think they are "normal" not like us, they can't have all the problems that we have. But when we all are honest and we share our stories, we find out that others really are not so different from us. They have many of the same struggles, the same dark places in their family lives too.

Ralph Milton writes about a book he put together of his mother's letters written to him about her life. The book only consists of seven copies because it was written for her family. "Mom died within a

hundred miles of the place she was born. Her life, by most standards, was unexceptional. But we read and reread her story because it feeds a deep hunger for connections, for a sense of continuity with our forebears.

I spent last summer in Israel doing biblical studies, but at a more fundamental level, it was an exercise in remembering. Just as I need to be connected to my mother and who she was, I need to be connected to my spiritual forebears. I needed to sit with the memory that fills every rock and mountain of that place - let that memory seep into my bones, because remembering is far more than recollection - far more than collecting old anecdotes.

Why? I look at what I've just written and that question sits out there on the end of my nose  
Why?

Does it matter? Yes, absolutely. All the ancients who sat around campfires and told each other stories knew it mattered. My children knew it mattered when they read Grandma's story over and over especially my two adopted children who carry the wounds of being torn from the heritage into which they were born.

We remember in order to learn from the past. Yes, of course, but there is a deeper reason, I am sure. I can feel that deeper reason, but I can't name it. I can sense that deeper reason, but I can't describe it.

Because another grandmother, Sophia, the spirit of wisdom keeps whispering in my ear, "Just keep listening for the story. Just keep listening for the story." (Milton: Sermon Seasonings)

In The Book of Joy, a dialogue between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, written by Douglas Abrams, a woman named Dawn replied to a question he posed about how people could possibly live with joy in a world so filled with sorrow and suffering. She posed it this way: "The world is in such turmoil - war, starvation, terrorism, pollution, genocide. My heart hurts for these issues. How

do I find joy in the midst of such large world problems?”

Archbishop Tutu’s response was: “You show your humanity, by how you see yourself not as apart from others but from your connection to others. I have frequently wept about the things such as the ones you have mentioned.

God created us and said, Go now, my child. You have freedom. And God has such an incredible reverence for that freedom that God would much rather we went freely to hell that compel us to come to heaven.

Yes, we’re capable of the most awful atrocities. We can give a catalogue of them. And God weeps until there are those who say I do want to try to do something. It is good also to remember that we have a fantastic capacity for goodness. And then you look again. And you see those doctors and nurses from other parts of the world who go into those situations. I mean, you think of say, Doctors Without Borders. Why do they go there? I mean, they could stay in France or wherever and have a wonderful practice. But they don’t They go off to some of the most poverty-stricken places.

They are just showing us what we are all capable of being. And by proxy we link ourselves to those and try as much as we can to enter into who we are: people of compassion. It’s incredible just how compassionate and generous people can be. (P 116).”

You don’t hear about it today but the rift that was formed by Jacob in today’s reading, is totally forgiven by Esau when they meet each other after Jacob’s time of exile. Esau greets his brother with tears and hugs not with war and destruction.

So as we listen, as Ralph Milton exhorts us, as we listen for the story today, maybe it is telling us that great things can come not necessarily just from perfect families but also from broken families. We don’t have to come from “perfect” or “normal” families (whatever that really means) but rather that God can use us (if we live with compassion), even us, to transform the world if we are open to

following the sound of God's voice. Thanks be to God. Amen.