

“The Blessing and Curse of Families”

Genesis 25:19–34

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Human beings are social creatures; we thrive in the context of relationships with other people. But not only that, we are familial creatures; we depend on those closest to us. I have spoken before about not just my immediate family, parents and sisters, but also grandparents and others who nurtured me, took care of me when my parents divorced, affirmed me and let me know I was loved. My Grandmother called me “An angel a’walkin’,” and who was I to argue with her?

Most of us have families that keep us on our feet, that are a source of strength and purpose. Dana, Ian and Ali, and Brittany, are that for me now. Surely you can name the people upon whom you depend.

But families can also be a source of tension and conflict. Families can be a blessing and a curse. I have told some of you about a Thanksgiving dinner when my aunt held a butcher’s knife at my throat because her oldest son and I were talking about having her committed. We did appreciate the confirmation that her meds were not working adequately. Dana had an uncle who raised his hand to hit her when he saw her books on Russian history, calling her a communist. Her interest is in pre-revolution Russian history. She is a Tsarist, not a communist!

All families have tensions and conflicts, characters and outcasts we try to avoid, loved ones who present greater challenges, but some families are worse than this. Many of the most violent acts are perpetrated against family members. When I did an internship in state parole many years ago in Lexington, Kentucky, most of the men I worked with were petty thieves and forgers, but there were two violent offenders released from prison because of a class-action lawsuit for overcrowding — one raped his sister, the other killed his wife. Families are wonderful, except when they are not.

The good news is biblical families reflect all of this. In contrast to what many people talk about as the “biblical family” — someone’s

idealized vision of one dad in charge, one subservient mom, and two perfect children never talking back — the Cleavers for those who get the reference — the actual biblical families come in many shapes and sizes and with an uneven mixture of health and disease. Biblical families are the source of strength, the foundation for faith and love, the means through which the Divine promise forms a beloved people called Israel. But biblical families are also the source of unparalleled horror.

Women are often treated poorly — wives are posed as sisters to be given away, daughters are offered up to violent offenders for the protection of men. All you need to do is read Phyllis Tribble's classic work *Texts of Terror* which details the horrors wrought by family on Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed woman in Judges 19, and Jephthah's daughter. Biblical families are sometimes atrocious!

So, how is this good news? It lets us know that our families, just as they are, with all the goodness and nobility and all the pettiness and meanness, all the dependable players and all the characters and outcasts, are normal. Our families are just like biblical families. There is no need for secrecy or shame. There is potential for generativity and blessing. Most of all, God's grace is at work always, even in the messiness.

Today's reading from Genesis 25 provides an illustration of these realities. This is a story of sibling rivalry which begins before the twins are born. It is a story of parental favoritism, with one parent loving one son and another loving the other. And it is a story about devious behavior being rewarded, apparently even by God. What in the world is going on here? Why kind of family is this? Well, it is the one through which the Divine promise of a great nation will be fulfilled.

Let's begin with the twins, Jacob and Esau. We might say Esau and Jacob, since Esau is born first, but since this story follows a trope of the Hebrew canon in which younger siblings surpass elders — Isaac over Ishmael, Joseph over his brothers, David over his brothers — we list Jacob first. His name means "heel," "supplanter," or "deceiver," and his personality is revealed in birth as he grabs Esau's heel, trying to pull him back. God has told their mother Rebekah that she will give birth to two nations and the older will serve the younger. So, the stage is set.

Esau, a name which means “hairy one” and refers to the fact that he is hairy when he is born, becomes a skillful hunter and a man of the field. His father Isaac loves him. He’s a man’s man! Jacob is a Momma’s Boy. He hangs out around the tents and becomes a good cook. Rebekah loves him.

Esau might not think much of his brother’s ways, but when he comes in from the field starving, and Jacob is cooking a stew, he suddenly develops a new opinion of his brother the Momma’s Boy. He wants some of that red stuff, he says. Jacob, never one to miss an opportunity for self-advancement, says, “Sure, but first sell me your birthright.” And Esau, thinking he is about to die, which he is not, says okay. Jacob makes him swear, and when he does, Esau eats and Jacob walks away laughing at how easy it is to take his brother’s place.

To be clear about what has happened here, a birthright is described in the Hebrew canon as a special strength of the firstborn (Genesis 49:3; Deuteronomy 21:7), prospective leadership of the family (Genesis 29:29; 49:8), and a double share in the family estate (Deuteronomy 21:15ff). Jacob gets all that for a bowl of stew! One hopes it is good.

Those who know the larger story realize this is just the beginning of conflict between these two brothers. There will be another act of treachery as Isaac is dying, threats of violence and a tearful reconciliation, and somehow through it all, this family remains a family and God works through it.

It is tempting to try to divide the family between those who are good and noble and those who are not. Jacob is a deceiver. How could God bless him? Esau is just a poor victim. Why should he be favored less? But both men are just human. Jacob does take advantage of his brother, but Esau sells out too easily. He’s not starving to death. He’s auditioning for a Snickers commercial! But both brothers have good qualities. They are very different, telling us, among other things, that people can be different. Even men can be male in different ways. Esau plays the more traditional male role, but Jacob is favored in the canon.

And what about Mom and Dad, Rebekah and Isaac, having favorites and playing them off each other? Is Rebekah simply fulfilling God’s desire for the younger son to prevail? It is a pious possibility. Or

are she and Isaac simply using their boys to work out their own tensions? Families are wonderful yet complicated things.

But this family is very much like our families. Sibling rivalry is not alien to us. Ali is five years younger than her brother, but she made a profession of faith and was baptized before her brother. She is on schedule to finish her PhD at a younger age than her brother. The younger child always seems to have a chip on the shoulder which motivates them to outdo the older (I say, as the oldest of three!).

Several sons in one family I knew took sibling rivalry to a new level. The night before his wedding, one brother was chloroformed and put in a body cast, then let out an hour before the wedding. The night before the wedding of that perpetrator, he was chloroformed and put in a casket, then let out an hour before his wedding. Wouldn't you like to have been born into that family? But sibling rivalry goes beyond adolescent pranks. It involves competition for parental favor, it drives ambition and work accomplishments, it affects self-understanding and relationships. The Jacob and Esau story is all too familiar to many of us.

Parental favoritism is also familiar. We deny it, of course. It's okay to bond more with one pet or another. Our male German shepherds have bonded more with me while the females have bonded more with Dana. But to favor one child over another is unhealthy.

Yet in how many families does one child feel overlooked or loved less while another seems to be favored by one or both parents? I cannot count the number of people I have known who have struggled to find a sense of blessing they felt a sibling received, even after parents have died. What a child feels may not match what a parent intends to convey, but we feel what feel. This part of the story too is all too familiar.

But while there are aspects of this story that feel familiar and thus normalize experience we might think is beyond the pale, the takeaway is not simply that our problematic patterns are tendencies we have to live with. We can strive for healthy sibling relationships. We can work to express love to all our children. And we can honor the feelings children and others express to us. Most of all, as we consider the biblical story, we can look for where God is at work in the midst of our relationships.

That is the other good news in this story, the more recognizable good news. As messy as this family is, God continues to work through it. Jacob and Esau follow their paths. They eventually reconcile. And the Divine promise is fulfilled. God is still at work in our lives, no matter how painfully complicated or joyfully connected we are. And God loves every member of our family, even those we struggle to love.

I knew two parents who refused to love one of their sons because he was gay. When he died tragically, they had no funeral and his mother did not go to his home. I don't understand that level of callousness. But I also must confess that I would struggle to love these parents because of their callousness. Yet God loves the gay son and the rejecting parents, and then God calls us to aspire to such unlimited love, and God continues working with us as long as we live. That is good news.

I had a couple of family experiences — one of blessing and one of curse — that were unrelated but happened within the space of a year. My father of nurture, technically my stepfather, decided to cut off all relationship with us for reasons that make no sense. It was a brutal and unnecessary experience that puzzles us to this day.

Then, mostly at Dana's urging, we reconnected with my biological father's family. As it turned out, he had died the year before. He never remarried and never had any other children, but I found three first cousins for whom I am the only living first cousin. They had been looking for me for years. When we met in one cousin's home in Smithfield, they started pulling out pictures of me as a child I had never seen. It was a wonderful experience!

Families bless us and curse us — scripture tells us this, as does life — but through all that happens, God is at work for good, healing the brokenness and deepening the joy. Families are a gift, even with all their complexity, because they provide space for love and they create openings for God's grace to be at work.