

“Sibling Rivalry”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 25: 19-34

Two weeks ago, I was part of fourteen youth and four adults from our church who served in mission in Ferguson, Missouri. It was a great week – we had wonderful interactions with the children, youth, and adults of Ferguson and greater-St. Louis. You will hear much more about that week of mission in the weeks ahead, especially when the youth of John Knox lead our worship services on August 13.

I have two observations from walking alongside these incredible young people from our congregation. First, they eat an enormous amount of food! Alicia Andrews and I were the grocery shoppers for the week. Every time we went to the store and got what we thought was plenty of food, it was like a magic trick, as “poof” – it was all gone! And for those of you who are the parents of teenage boys – I don’t want to see your grocery bills. I think Debbie and I have been spoiled to have two girls!

The other observation I had was that our group included several groups of siblings. Of the fourteen youth who were on this trip, nine of them were related to one another. There were four sets of siblings, and I have to admit that they were not your typical sets of siblings. I didn’t witness nit-picking or arguing with one another, and in fact, many of them were supportive and had fun with one another. Now, I’m sure they aren’t always like this – I can certainly attest to that! But it was a unique characteristic of this particular group of youth.

As an only child, I have always been fascinated by brothers and sisters. And as the parent of two children, I’ve decided this has been God’s way of having fun with me for never having siblings of my own. I will often look at Debbie and ask, “What’s this that’s going on?” And she’ll just look at me and say, “It’s called having a sibling.”

The story of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis is perhaps the best-known story in the Bible of sibling rivalry. In this ancient story from Israel’s past, we are brought face-to-face with the most puzzling of questions of faith: why did God choose the one who schemes and cheats his way to the top to carry on the line of promise? It is a story of dichotomy and juxtaposition, in which the phrase “brotherly love” is the last thing which would come to our mind.

As was the case with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah were faced with a crisis of not having conceived and borne a child. As one commentator puts it, “Everything is ready, but nothing works. The crisis turns out to be not a biological one, but a theological crisis. Isaac

is driven to prayer (v.21). Isaac and Rebekah do not between them have the resources or the capability to generate their own future. They are required to assume a position of need and a voice of urgent petition” (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, W/JKP, 398). This crisis is addressed and resolved in a very quick manner as we read the text. Isaac prayed; the Lord granted his prayer; and Rebekah conceived. The future of Israel is only possible because God has been gracious.

And yet, even in the womb before they are born, Esau and Jacob are at each other’s throats. “The children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’” (v.22). Needless to say, I think that sentiment is still present today with any woman who has been pregnant! But for Rebekah, it causes her to turn once again to her faith, and she prays to God. Notice that we are not told what she says to God; we are only told Yahweh’s response to her. And in the Lord’s response, we face the crux of this passage.

“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” (v. 23). Instead of being told that she has two sons in her womb, Rebekah is told that from her will come two peoples, two nations. And not any nations – but two which will be divided, and will take up arms against one another, and live in hostility, not peace. To top it off, the older will serve the younger. Indeed, when they were born, the younger son, Jacob, was grabbing his older brother’s ankle, seeking to come out first instead of last.

All the expectations of what should happen are being turned upside-down. Instead of the older son being entitled to everything of the family, the younger son is being granted those riches. Instead of a couple finally rejoicing in the birth of their first children, they are left to wonder what the future holds, based on this message from God. And these reversed expectations are only enforced by the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob at the end. Jacob barter with his brother when he asks for some food, and through his bartering he gains supremacy over his older sibling. Where is God in all of this conniving and scheming?

In a real sense, it is difficult to say. On the one hand, “the oracle (of God) overturns the practice of primogeniture, the privilege and entitlement of the firstborn. This oracle subverts that social convention and opens the way for the ‘last one’ to become the ‘first one’” (ibid). On the other hand, this narrative also illustrates the unfettered power and will of God. It’s God’s decision to decide how the line of succession will fall in Israel’s future, and not up to the laws and customs of the culture of the day. Jacob not only is blessed by God to carry on Israel’s future, but he takes steps of his own to legitimize that blessing, as he barter for Esau’s birthright. “(Jacob) is a creature of his free, powerful,

decisive God, the one who ended barrenness and caused birth, the one who ended primogeniture and entitled ‘the younger’” (ibid).

Where is God in all of this? As children of God, we are often left asking this question. When friends and loved ones are racked with disease and illness, and face an uncertain future. When our world is torn apart by terrorist attacks and mass killings. When people and children are forced to live in poverty, not unlike what our group witnessed in Ferguson and St. Louis two weeks ago. When natural disasters strike, like the flooding our city and state has experienced over the last several days. It is not unusual for us to question how any of this could be the work and will of a living, loving God.

And yet, if we choose to take God out of the equation, where does that leave us? Are our lives any easier? Do the questions become less-complicated to answer when we do it all by ourselves? Does the pain decrease at all?

We do not know why God decided to bring Jacob ahead of his brother Esau, and promise him the leadership of God’s people. We do not know why God allows evil to exist in the world, causing chaos and bloodshed and anger and war. We do not know why God allows the people we love to die before we are ready, and allows such diseases as cancer, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s to tear apart our minds and bodies.

We do not know why God acts the way God acts. The only thing we do know is that we are here because God blessed us with the gift of life; that we know God most deeply through his Son, Jesus Christ; and that we are here in this place today because the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts to stir us to serve. Perhaps it is not our calling to know “why.” Perhaps it is enough that we know “who,” and trust that the “why” will take care of itself in due time.

These past two weeks, our family has been renovating our kitchen. It’s nearing completion, and we have brought in reinforcements to complete the job, as evidenced by my parents being present today. And I will be sharing much about this adventure in future sermons, that is for certain.

But last weekend I went home to West Virginia, to attend the funeral of one our family’s closest friends, Mr. John Bowles. John died on July 4, and the service was at the church from which my dad retired. Dad shared in leadership alongside the current pastor of that congregation, and it was the first time I had been in that sanctuary in eleven years, which was Dad’s last Sunday when he retired from active ministry. Mom, Dad and I all agreed that it was both good and hard to be back in that setting after such a long period of time.

You couldn’t ask for having better friends and neighbors than John and Sandy Bowles. John and Dad worked alongside one another these last several years for Habitat for Humanity in Charleston, and they

invited Mom and Dad to join them in the fall with their extended family for vacations at the North Carolina beach. Mom and Dad were there for the Bowles when their oldest son, Michael, died in his twenties due to substance abuse. And the Bowles were there for Mom and Dad when life in the church was acrimonious and filled with tension. Salt-of-the-earth folks are John and Sandy.

Which is why it was hard to see John start to deteriorate mentally over the last few years. When they were with us for Mom and Dad's fiftieth anniversary in September, I could tell John just wasn't tracking everything I was saying. And then, three weeks ago, he was picking up a package at a neighbor's house. He fell, broke his pelvis, and likely suffered a concussion. After he had surgery, his condition did not improve, and the family decided to admit him to hospice care, where he died peacefully on the Fourth of July.

This experience has only added to the questions I have been asking God this year. "Why do you let these things happen? Why would you let Debbie's father die so suddenly? Why would you let John suffer with this disease, and then die in such a heart-breaking way? Why, God, why?"

Sometimes there is no immediate answer. And sometimes, the answer comes when I take the time to listen for God's voice.

I heard it in the recounting of Mom and Dad that Sandy Bowles and her children, Beth and Dan, were all on the same page of what John wanted as far as hospice care and a dignified, good death. And I heard it in the stories and testimony shared at John's funeral, of how God used him to touch the lives of so many children and youth in the church, and through the healing he brought others in his career as a physical therapist.

We may not always receive the answers to our questions of "why." But in the midst of our struggles, we can trust and believe in the "who" of our faith. And in our trusting, we will receive unexpected reminders that our God will always be present with us.

Thanks be to the living, loving God, now and forever. Amen.