

A House Divided
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A father walks out on his family, saddling them with limited funds and an uncertain future.

A mother drinks herself to sleep each night, neglecting the needs of her children.

A grandparent passes away, leaving behind a will that obviously favors one side of the family over another.

Family strife haunts our literature, our soap operas, and even our own lives. I imagine that whether we freely speak of it or not, we each have someone or something in our family tree we aren't exactly proud of.

It's no different with the family tree of our faith.

The scripture lesson for this Sunday begins series of stories focusing on the adventures of Jacob in Genesis. Together, we will follow Jacob through his journey, walking his path with him for a month. On July 24th we will welcome a guest preacher who has done some extensive study into the Jacob stories, and hear her take on one of the texts.

In this time, we will dive into some of the stories some of us may not have heard since Sunday school. But I hope to look at them through the lenses of adult understanding, and see something of the face of God within them.

As family troubles go, sibling rivalry is nothing too shocking. In fact, for some, sibling rivalry can be a source of healthy competition which motivates achievement and success while nurturing healthy relationship among siblings.

In other cases, we have siblings like Jacob and Esau, destructive, deceiving, and bringing about despair and distrust throughout the course of their relationship – even from their mother's womb.

These two have no hope of getting along. And things are only exacerbated by the parents taking sides, and even encouraging the boys' bad behavior.

As their story unfolds, it becomes clear that Jacob, the schemer, though he is the younger, will come out on top, taking over his older brother's place and position.

This turnout is definitely subversive. The younger should serve the older according to the standard rules of this culture. And typically, the one favored by the father (here, Esau, the elder) was understood to be the one favored by God.

Instead, Jacob turns out to be the one who will take over the family blessing.

As unconventional as it was for the time, the ascendancy of the youngest son is actually a common pattern in the Bible. It is Isaac rather than his older half-brother, Ishmael, who remains the focus of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:18-19). It is Jacob's son of his old age, Joseph, who sees his dreams fulfilled when his older brothers bow down to him in Egypt (Gen. 42:6-9; cf., Gen. 37:5-10). David, the youngest of all of Jesse's sons, is anointed king by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:10-13). When his elder brothers cower in fear, the boy David emerges as the amazing victor over the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17:33, 50).

These and many similar biblical stories of the youngest son rising to prominence contradict the expectations, laws, and conventions of society. The weak and marginal become the surprising means through which God works in Israel and in the world.

As we hear over and over in the gospels, so we find here in the stories of Jacob. God favors the last and the least, turning convention on its head, and overthrowing society's norms.

But it's not always easy. Oh, it's easy to say, God favors the underdog, God lifts up the lowly. God is with the outsider. But in reality, that type of script-flipping can be uncomfortable, to say the least.

Between Jacob and Esau, we aren't really cheering for either one. They both have their faults.

As one commentator said of Jacob in an interview, "Frankly, he's a creep. He's a total creep, and he comes from a totally dysfunctional family."

And to that I say, thanks be to God.

The reality is that God chooses sinners, and builds god's kingdom through sinners. Through real people, living real lives and being human.

These stories are not just about a particular family, they are about us. One of the incredible messages of the old testament is that God chooses who God will. And that each of us has potential to bring the will of God to bear.

It doesn't matter where we've been, or what we've done. God looks at each of us, and sees the potential in our lives. Each and every one of us can be part of God's vision for the world.

We might ask ourselves, who are the exploited within our community? Who are the marginalized and the poor? Who are the people who lose what they have, and what they need to live? Because chances are, wherever they are, that's where God will be working in the world.

But again, that doesn't mean it will be easy.

This past week at General Synod, I heard story after story of churches that reinvented themselves. Many were considered dying, and more than one was counseled to close its doors. Most had seen significant losses in membership, funds, and energy. Again and again, the script was flipped when the congregations made the choice to step outside of their long-held patterns and ideas of who they were, and welcome in people they never thought they would share worship with.

Learning that welcome is more than simply being friendly, these congregations found their faith lives challenged, deepened, and strengthened by letting go of their expectations of perfection, and reaching out to the communities around them.

As one worship leader shared in his testimony, "Give preference to the weird and the freaky, the ugly and the stinky, and you will see the face of God in your sanctuary."

Would we be willing to do the same? Not as a church-saving desperation measure, but as a practice of faith that we hear as a call from God?

We've already started along the path. Even just a few years ago, who would have imagined the many changes we've been through. We've taken

on more and more hands-on mission that has called us to love and serve our homeless neighbors at PADS. We've made adult trips to the Gulf part of our very fabric of being, meeting and caring for our brothers and sisters in the south each time.

What more does God have in store for us, as we live out our call as God's people?

In the coming months ahead, we will soon welcome an interim minister. He or she will invite us once more to reflect on who we are as a congregation, and who God is calling us to be.

My prayer is that as we reflect together, we look at ourselves honestly, and learn from our collective past. I pray, too, that as we look forward, we listen to the call of God to live in solidarity with the last and the least. To explore new ways we might reach out. To live justice and peace. To enact God's kingdom here on earth.

That might mean doing things a little differently. It might mean opening our hearts and our doors to others who 'are not like us' whatever that might mean.

It might mean changing some of our long-held beliefs about the way church is supposed to be, or even about how the world works. The interim time can be an unsettling one. And if we let it, that time can unsettle us out of our old assumptions, and into new patterns for living.

For the next few weeks, we will hear the family stories of Jacob. We will see how God worked in the life and story of one of our ancestors in the faith. May we be inspired to hear our own faith stories within these stories, may we see the face of God within them, and within our own lives, and may we be called to live in new ways. Amen.