

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 13, 2008 Stephen Billings

Recently I received a belated birthday present from my daughter Melissa and her family, a software program from Ancestry.com, called "Family Tree Maker." It looks very interesting. I am hoping it will prove useful to Barbara and me for capturing and organizing many pieces of data, photos, and other documents related to our families, and then for passing on to them what they might want in family history and stories.

I do have a caution, however, as I remember a comment made many years ago by John O'Hear, the former rector of Christ Church, Christiana Hundred, about people in his family who esteem their forbearers, often idolizing them, or idealizing them, unrealistically.

As a student of family systems and a family therapist, I recognize that we often have selective memory. And family dynamics can prove very complex and very difficult. I remember clearly my surprise at a family gathering after the death of an aged uncle, when a secret was revealed to me, about the cause of the estrangement and shunning that had occurred in my grandparents' generation. I suppose many, if not all, families have secrets, often kept to try to avoid pain or shame. Such events and developments can have great and long-lived impact. (The late rabbi and psychotherapist Edwin Friedman wrote a wonderful book about such matters, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*.)

There isn't any family, I trust, that doesn't experience some conflicts and disagreements at times. The same is true for brothers within a family. I know from my experience as the second born of five brothers, all still living (we have one sister) My mantra as No. 2 tended to be like the rental car ad slogan from years ago, "Like Avis, we try harder."

The first lesson today describes the relationship and characters of two special brothers in ancient times, Esau and Jacob, fraternal twins born to Isaac, Abraham's son, and Rebekah.

First out of the womb is Esau, ruddy and lively, who later becomes the man of action, the virile, hairy outdoorsman, who favors his father with special game brought home from the hunt. Esau as firstborn would be the one tradition dictated would receive the birthright of an extra share of inheritance and the special blessing from his father Isaac. It seems he is Isaac's favorite.

Second out of the womb comes Jacob, more subdued, but grasping from the get-go, holding on to his brother Esau's heel. He becomes the homebody, the clever one, Momma's Boy. You get the picture...

Today's story describes how one day Esau came home famished, maybe seriously hypoglycemic, "out-of-his mind" desperate for food, and he smells some of the good stew his twin has made. An unholy bargain is made, whereby Jacob extorts his brother Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup and some bread. How ambitious and clever, even devious, Jacob is... Esau has second thoughts later, and great anger, so Jacob and his mother out of fear decide Jacob had better leave for a safer place for a while. A classic case of family conflict and division.

A member of our Meet The Propers session on Wednesday asked why this lesson would be included in the lectionary. The ensuing passages in the Book of Genesis relate the unfolding of the life of both the brothers, but principally Jacob. Esau becomes the father of the Edomites, and Jacob becomes the patriarch of the Israelites, the twelve tribes, the father of a favorite (in the next generation) Joseph, the one with the special coat of many colors, who is left for dead by his

brothers, because they are angry and jealous of his favored position with his father. Jacob is able out of cleverness to become very prosperous through deals and deceptions with his Uncle Laban, his mother's brother.

What do we make of all this, and what is the answer to the question of why this should be in the lectionary?

You may remember that Jacob has a dream, about a ladder...And he has an epiphany about the awesomeness of God/Yahweh at Bethel, and he receives a divine blessing. Later, he decides that he really has to return home and resolve the conflict with his brother Esau, but on the way he has to wrestle with a stranger, who leaves him with a further blessing. Of course, there is much more to the story, but the point is, that Jacob and his family, including his twin brother, are reconciled and it is clear that God has been at work through the people and places of the story, ordering the course of history for God's purposes, even through the conniving Jacob, who is renamed by the heavenly messenger/Yahweh "Israel."

So, God works through unworthy persons and unsavory situations, time and time again. Ultimately, Jacob recapitulates his discovery that "surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." Jacob as Israel forms a covenant with God, a partnership, to fulfill the divine plan. God dwelt with him, directed him, and acted through him, in spite of all the shenanigans.

When we read in the lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome, about "the spirit of God, like a strong wind, magnificently clearing the air, freeing (us) from the fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death," (to quote from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase) we do well to remember how the same man, as Saul of Tarsus, was responsible for the persecution and death of the followers of the risen Christ, before his blinding conversion and transformation on the Road to Damascus.

God intervened in the life and person of Saul so he became Paul; God lived in and through Paul, so that the Gospel would be proclaimed and lived, and so Jesus' ministry would continue to prosper through the likes of people like Jacob who became Israel, extortionists, harlots, embezzlers, convicted sex offenders and others who are sent to jail, as well as countless men and women like you and me, who are equally flawed and human, even though they may not come to the attention of the courts, the police briefs in the local news, or the neighborhood gossip!

All of us, Jesus in effect says, are different kinds of soil in which God tries to plant the seeds of righteousness, love, and justice. God really does yearn for us to be open and receptive to receive the love and grace that Jesus provides all of humanity, like seeds that fall on good soil, which bring surprising harvests, far beyond our expectations. God in Christ came among us to take the conflicts of our human condition, our dysfunctional lives, our conflicted families, the messes of our diocesan life, whatever(!), in order to set all this right once and for all. It can't and won't happen all at one fell swoop, but rather it happens as we consider and pray and covenant to remain in community with others of faith, as followers of the One who came among us to forgive us, to inspire us, to empower us, to sustain us, to claiming the world in his name, according to his promise that the world and all that is in it would be redeemed. With God's Spirit living in us, dwelling in us, living through us, God's will indeed is being done.

The Collect for today sums it up perfectly:

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power

faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.