

“Brotherly Love”

I grew up in a family of four brothers. I was the oldest, then came David, Tim and Stephen. We were born about three years apart. Our parents were married to each other the whole time we were growing up. No step-parents or step-siblings. We grew up with the same values. We were taught the value of hard work, the need to get a college education, and to help those in need. Our father was a United Methodist minister and our mother a registered nurse. We were raised in a home where there was right or wrong and responsibility for one’s actions. Although we knew when we acted correctly or not, when we made mistakes our parents loved us and were fair in their discipline.

That’s where the similarities end. I was the public one, the one who made friends with people and starred in productions from age 5. I basically did what I was supposed to do, but was independent when needed. I attended a Christian based college, Oral Roberts University, when most of my high school classmates went to Clemson or Furman or South Carolina. Later in life I answered God’s call and went to seminary in Washington, DC. I have always loved history and politics.

David was the rebel in the family. He was like the anti-Wally and was known to break a rule or two, though none that serious. He was quiet and reflective, oscillating between mathematics and philosophy. He ended up

becoming the most idealistic of us all. He went into computer science and was really good at it, eventually being the head of computer security at McLeod hospital in Florence, SC. At his funeral in 2018 after his untimely death, many of his coworkers came to honor and remember him.

Tim has been known as “Captain Question.” He has always had questions about things. Sometimes you are not quite sure where he is headed with the questions. Anyone who knows Tim appreciates that he is unique. Like me, he is outgoing, makes friends, and never met a stranger. He was known to bring in stray animals to the family. After his dedication to his family, his greatest devotion is to South Carolina Gamecock football!

Stephen, the youngest, was quiet as a child. It was a little hard for him to stand out with all those older brothers and a father who as a prominent public figure. He used his time wisely. He taught himself to read, with some help from our mother, and by the time he was four years old had already read the entire World Book Encyclopedia. He was always good in school and ended up specializing in urology and oncology. He has been a professor at the University of Virginia Medical School since 2011 and also has a urology clinic there as well. When he tells me about operating on someone’s kidney it reminds me that he can do things I could never do.

But as I reflect I know I can do things Stephen can't do. David could do things only David could do. Tim has his own way of doing things. This is the beauty of God's creation as we are given unique tasks to do and we always have the choice as to how we will use our lives.

Today our scripture passage from Genesis 25:19-34 contains the story of two brothers, Esau and Jacob. They are fraternal twins who could not have been much different. One could argue that genetics determines one's future. Esau came out first and was entitled to the birthright as the first child. He was clothed with hair and the inference is that he is physically larger than Jacob. Later on we read that Esau was the outdoorsmen. Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home.

But there were environmental factors which influenced these two brothers. Isaac loved Esau because Esau loved eating game. Rebekah loved Jacob. We are not told why she loved Jacob more but it probably because of God's oracle told to her when she prayed. It said the older would serve the younger.

But we cannot conclude that the relationship between the brothers is predetermined just because of the oracle. God is not seen as the agent in the development of this relationship. Once again we see how people determine their own destiny (and that of other generations to come) by their actions. By the oracle, God intended Rebekah to influence Jacob, but she did not have to follow God's

plan. She could have chosen to work against God, but did not. What is significant here is God gave a woman the opportunity to determine history in a patriarchal male dominated society. Rebekah becomes the first in a long line of women, including Mary, who are significant in the salvation story.

It is clear that Jacob's destiny is not necessarily predetermined either. He must go to a lot of trouble to get Esau's birthright but he is prepared. He takes advantage of a brother who is lazy and seeks instant gratification over his future. Esau gives up his birthright for bread and lentil stew. Let us take this as a lesson to not seek easy quick fixes which will ultimately be detrimental to our future and our family's future.

We also learn that strength is subject to definition or interpretation. Here one would have thought that Esau had it made. He was stronger physically; he won the battle in the womb to get out first. Under the laws of primogeniture, as the firstborn he was entitled to all of his father's estate. But these rights could be forfeited or sold. Ultimately Jacob is the stronger because of his cleverness and his planning. This shows us that one who is determined with a plan is successful. And God is fine with that, according to this story.

There was struggle between these brothers and ultimately between their descendants. Jacob would be the father of the Israelites and Esau the Edomites. Let

us not always interpret conflict or struggle as negative. Sometime it is needed to achieve positive change. In my family there was competition between the brothers. This competition made us better students, and working out problems made us better people. We learned from each other. Although we fought as children, when we became adults we helped each other out.

Today there is conflict over what to do about racial justice in our country. The fact that there is disagreement over what to do does not mean we should give up or do nothing. To make the needed changes, some traditions will have to be given up. Some will not give up these traditions easily, not least because they have law and custom on their side. God shows in this story of Esau and Jacob he was willing to give up the law of primogeniture for the sake of divine purposes, even if it caused conflict. Jacob was to be leader in the salvation story.

We have to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in what to change in existing structures and institutions. The doing away with customs and traditions that make no sense or promote inequality opens up a future of possibilities. But it is just as true that we not idolize the reversal of the traditional for its own sake. Let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. How do we proceed? The furtherance of God's mission in the world would be one basic criterion.

Let us once again remember the power of prayer. Isaac prays to God when his wife is unable to become pregnant. God answers and Rebekah conceives. Rebekah then prays to God when she has difficulty with the pregnancy. God answers by giving her the oracle of why this is happening to her.

As we close today, we are once again reminded that God works through all of us, especially those who are imperfect. These two brothers were not perfect. Jacob is cunning, takes advantage of his brother and sets the stage for a major family conflict. Esau comes across as a dullard, careless within his family responsibilities, and despising of his birthright. Why would God choose either? This story illustrates that God can use anyone for his purposes. Think of Moses. He could not speak well and was technically a murderer. Do not ever become discouraged. God can use you, despite what you might think of yourself or your abilities.

As the closing song “Let There Be Peace on Earth” reads, our ultimate goal is for us all of us to walk together in perfect harmony. We will get there with the work of the Holy Spirit. But our story today reminds us that in God’s plan for salvation, this walk will involve struggles, conflicts, the doing away with some traditions, the keeping of some traditions, and the creation of new possibilities among all peoples.