

Battle for Blessing

sermon digest

February 2, 2014

Genesis 28:10-17; 32:24-32

larry dipboye

Psychologists call it sibling rivalry. It is a behavior trait in brothers and sisters close enough in age to be in constant competition for food, toys, adult attention, parental affection, and anything else that might be important through the child's eye. I could easily illustrate from observation: my mother's large family or my own place in the middle between older sisters and a younger brother. I have plenty of stories from the parent's point of view, but you probably know the family dynamics from your own experience. Siblings recognize the tension even if they do not fully understand it. Understanding your feelings of jealousy, your sense of parental injustice, and fight for parental preference might help you to leave the battleground. Ideally we outgrow the conflict; we grow to adulthood, leaving the competition for dominance behind, learning to laugh at ourselves and to share memories with our siblings. But some people never quite grow up or grow out of the competitive battleground. The battle for parental favor sometimes translates into competition for dominance that can last a lifetime.

The competitive spirit is native to the human condition. For Jacob and Esau the battle began in the womb. Rebekah felt the twins struggling for life within her and appealed to God. Esau is born first, making him the elder. By the book, the oldest son gets everything—money, property, rank, and influence. He even becomes the spiritual heir holding in trust the covenant of his father to be passed on down the family line. Esau's ruddy complexion earns the unexciting name "Red." Jacob was born grasping his brother's heel, struggling for first place, as if the infant knew that he would grow up like the rental car company Avis: "When you're only Number 2, you try harder. Or else!" At birth he is named for his competitive spirit. Jacob means "he takes by the heel," in a word, "deceiver, trickster, con man." According to the story, Jacob is destined to succeed by whatever means he must employ to get ahead of his brother.

The oracle from God exposed the sibling rivalry as the struggle between nations. "The elder shall serve the younger." In the end, Jacob—the nation Israel—and Esau—the nation Edom—would struggle for dominance as international neighbors. The elaborate story in Genesis that portrays Jacob as a shrewd, manipulative cheat and Esau as the macho, hairy hunter consumed by his appetites explains the superiority of Israel over Edom. But the fascinating story is more than ancient international politics. In this competitive, dog-eat-dog world the story of Jacob and Esau lies behind family feuds, racial bigotry, and national wars. Henry F. Knight (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, summer-fall, 1992, p.451ff) sees the competition between two brothers in the story of two religions, Judaism and Christianity. The younger sibling Christianity struggles to dominate the elder Judaism. The story comes to a horrible crisis in the Shoah, the Nazi genocide against the Jews.

This happens to be Super Bowl Sunday. Today the professional championship for this season will be decided for America's most popular sport, football. But something very un-American is going on behind the scenes. A growing crescendo of crippling injuries to players has become a national topic of conversation. Like Esau, these prime physical specimens of male prowess are finding that too many blows to the head lead to later disabling dementia, sometimes suicide, but finally disability and defeat. The latest statistics indicate that forty per cent of Americans, including the President, would not want their sons to play football, although many of us will be in front of TV's this evening yelling for our side. The competitive human nature comes out in our love for games. Most of us grow up learning to compete with our peers, and we reward winners and despise losers in our culture. We might well conclude that the Olympics or the Super Bowl is better than what is happening in Syria and Afghanistan, but we ought to recognize the same spirit of conflict and competition in our fun and games and sibling rivalry that come out in war.

Paul thinks he has a handle on the problem in sibling competition that leads to the choice of winners and losers. It is all a matter of divine election (Romans 9:13-15): "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau." "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." Like Genesis and the memory of a nation, Paul believed that God prefers folks like Jacob. Either God is responsible for the final outcome leading Jacob to victory over Esau, or God is on the sidelines observing our competition and showing preference for the strong over the weak, the cheaters over those who play fair.

Of course, it's not fair; but, according to Paul, God can do what God wants. So, it was not about

lying and cheating. It was about the providence of God. Jacob was destined, it seems, to receive the formal affirmation of his father; thus, he took his place in the line of patriarchs. In spite of cheating, lying, and stealing, Jacob would eventually become *Israel*, the man for whom the entire nation was named.

I have to confess that I don't agree with Paul in assigning winners to the will of God. My Bible usually portrays God on the side of the poor, the weak, and the marginal people of the world. When the nation Israel became the underdog, beaten down by bully nations, and tossed from one tyrant to another, the Prophets began to note God's love for his people even in defeat. That is the way good parents behave. We may encourage our children to excel and challenge them to compete, but in the end our love for them is bigger than their rank in the competition. The point at which we need the parental love of God the most is when we are at the bottom of life.

We are not created equal in ability or performance. What Paul identifies as God's choice of winners and losers is better understood as the human differences connected to equipment with which we are born and which we acquire through life's experiences. Whether a Down's Syndrome child or a child prodigy is born to a family is not a matter of God's preference, but we cannot avoid the absence of equality here. The Jews remembered Jacob's superiority over Esau as God's preference, but a basic fact of life stands. Inequality is built-in to human nature from birth. Most of us are aware of areas in our lives in which we excel and others where we are deficient. Rather than viewing human differences in terms of winners and losers, we need to understand our diverse nature as the strength of creation. We are not made to dominate one another. We have been created for community in which we work together, pooling our differences, complementing strength and weakness.

Something very bothersome about the Esau-Jacob story is the element of parental favoritism that is stated and perhaps affirmed. Not only is Jacob God's favorite, he is Rebekah's choice. The problem in the story is that the parents do not have enough blessing to go around. I detect a subtle discomfort in the Jewish reflection on the reality show where the rules of the game of life are obviously defective. When Jacob with Rebekah's guidance fools his old blind father into giving him the blessing intended for his brother, Esau comes on the scene and cries out in agony, "Bless me, me also, father!" But old Isaac was out of blessings, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." This is a blundering misunderstanding of the nature of parental blessing. Parents may not bless all of their children the same way or at the same time, but the blessing of our children can never be an act of preference or exclusion.

For the nation Israel, Jacob had to come out the winner to justify their existence, but a further examination of his life raises questions about just how much of a winner he was. The practice of parental preference continues in the family of Jacob, who comes to prefer his son Joseph above all of his brothers and shows that preference with a special coat. Sibling rivalry leads to bullying and finally selling Joseph into slavery. Indeed, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children.

Blessing empowers conversion. Some form of the word *blessing* shows up about 400 times in the Old Testament. The Psalms begin with blessing and end in doxology. The Hebrew word *beraka* often shows up on the door of a men's Bible class. To be blessed is to be affirmed, surrounded by good. The crass story of the blessing of Jacob is a poor example of human behavior. Jacob could be called anything but gracious. It almost treats the goodness of God as an object for competition and conflict. But the redeeming quality in the story is the conversion of Jacob.

Walter Brueggemann notes that the two encounters with God at Bethel and at Peniel are definitive for the whole saga. Two life-changing events occur on the journey to Jacob's dominance over his brother. In flight from his brother's anger Jacob had a dream of inheritance in which he was promised the land of Canaan, but more important, God promised to go with Jacob and to guide him. That encounter with God seemed to sustain Jacob through the years of dealing with his shrewd uncle Laban. Finally, Jacob sent word to Esau that he was coming home. Because life and death hung in the balance, Jacob again was open to a life-changing encounter with God. At the Jabbock River, he wrestled with a man until daybreak. Jacob declared that he had wrestled with God and prevailed—the meaning of his new name Israel. Later Jewish reflection modified the encounter to a messenger from God, an angel. Elie Wiesel in *Messengers of God* believes that Jacob was wresting with Jacob, God

within him: “Jacob was attacked by his own guardian angel. The mysterious aggressor? The other half of Jacob’s split self.”

Wiesel is a survivor of Auschwitz who came out of the death camp denouncing his religion, all religion, and all the gods who claim power over us. He vowed never again to speak the Psalms, to offer the prayers, or to invoke the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But very slowly his anger and battle with God moved him to a new place in life where he could again find meaning in life and a new faith in the God of his Fathers.

Most of us come out of the evangelical Christian tradition that roots salvation in conversion. It says, you have to be transformed from who you have been into what you can be through the power of the God revealed in Christ. I have come to realize that the walk with God involves more than one conversion. Every encounter with God leads to a new wrestling match with ourselves, but every encounter also opens to us the door to new life where we can take the next step toward the fulfillment of the blessing of God that is rooted in our creation.

Elie Wiesel concludes: “Jacob has just understood a fundamental truth: God is in man, even in suffering even in misfortune, even in evil. God is everywhere. In every being, not only in the victim. God does not wait for man at the end of the road, the termination of exile; he accompanies him there”(p. 132). This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and let us add, the God of Esau, Jesus, and each of us.