

“WHY CAN’T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?”

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Genesis 25:19-34

Back in the olden days, in the 1970's when I was in college, (I know you will find this hard to believe), but my friends and I were known to schedule our classes around soap operas. Yep! It's true. We would gather in the lounge on the second floor of Manokin Hall at what was then called Salisbury State College and be glued to the television set - back then we didn't each have televisions in our own rooms! So we'd get together in the lounge, and we'd be glued to the TV watching shows like General Hospital, drooling over men like Luke as he wooed his beloved Laura.

A few years later, they probably should have cancelled classes on the day that Luke and Laura were married, because dorm lounges all across America were packed to watch that big event!

Now, I'm not going to take a poll today to see who likes or watches soap operas, because, first of all, I know I wouldn't get an honest answer. Everybody likes soap operas. Wait a minute - before you jump all over me because you're not home during the day and wouldn't be caught dead watching The Young and the Restless or The Bold and the Beautiful, I'll bet that there are some here - even men - who watched Dallas or Dynasty and in more recent years, The Sopranos or shows like that. It's just human nature - we get hooked on those melodramas.

So perhaps you know the soap opera, the melodrama of the family who, after struggling for years to have children, finally had twins. From the time those two were conceived, they were at each other's throats. They gave their mother fits during her pregnancy, they were as different as night and day. When they grew up, one liked the outdoors and hunting and all that kind of stuff, while the other preferred to stay indoors and didn't mind cooking alongside his mother.

To top it all off, the father favored one son, and the mother the other. And then, things got ugly - really ugly. One of the brothers stole something valuable from the other - tricked him out of it. It got so bad that the one who had done the stealing had to run away. Then, while he was estranged from his family, he kept up his trickery along the way, duping his father-in-law out of money too.

Have you seen that soap opera? Do you recognize it? Does it ring a bell? I hope so, because it's right out of holy scripture - it's part of this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures in Genesis - the story of Jacob and Esau - the classic dysfunctional family.

Isn't it amazing to find a story like that in the pages of the Bible? Well, you know what? Thank goodness it's there. Thank goodness, for it is honest and it is real!

The Bible shows the family in all its reality. One preacher preached on the story of Jacob and Esau, and after the service, a woman came up to him and thanked him. She was a family

counselor and she told him that it was the most gracious sermon she had heard in a long time. “Really,” he replied, “I was afraid people would think it was sort of negative on families.” “No,” she said, “I meet all these families who feel guilty - they feel guilty because of who they are, and they’re just normal, but they think they’re supposed to be acting like the Cleavers on Leave It to Beaver, or something, and they’re not.” (*Ten Great Preachers*, Bill Turpie, ed., p. 164).

Oh, how true that is. There is a common perception among people that their families should be a certain way and say certain things and always get along wonderfully and peacefully - and that creates a whole lot of pressure and leads to a whole lot of disappointment when it doesn’t happen - which it almost never does.

And there’s a common misperception about families that come to church. There’s a perception that church families are perfect, they’ve got their life together, their families are all wonderful and loving and always have it together. In fact, some people tell me that’s why they don’t come to church with their families. They feel inadequate. Their family has problems and they feel like everybody here has got it together.

Apparently, they haven’t read the Book of Genesis lately, have they? For if they had, they would know that the Biblical story, indeed, the human story is filled with people just like you and me, people who struggle, and face a whole lot of issues, sometimes in not very productive ways.

It’s so important and so valuable for us to have this Biblical story. It is real - we can identify with it. I would imagine that some part of this story will touch practically everyone in this room. For no doubt, in this place today, there are parents dealing with kids who are very unique and very different from each other, siblings who are at each other constantly, parents favoring one child over another, jealousy, deception, estrangement, bitterness, mothers-in-law at odds with daughters-in-law - the list goes on and on.

So, in fact, we need to look at this story more closely, for I believe that as we do, we will glean some very valuable insights into life in families, where we sometimes wonder, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

The first insight I want to suggest that we can glean from this story this morning is what I’ve already alluded to a little - and it is this - there are no perfect families. Period. There are no perfect families. You may look around and think you see them - but there are no perfect families. Every family has its own quirks, every family has its own struggles, most families have their own secrets and skeletons in the closet, every family has something - that’s just the way it is. And I hope that hearing that is good news for you - because oh the guilt we heap on ourselves over that.

Bishop William Willimon preached a sermon once on that, and he called it “God’s Dysfunctional Family” and basically said that every family is a little bit dysfunctional - it’s just part of being a family. He said if you don’t believe it, try going to a family reunion and you’ll see it there. You’ll also understand why you only have family reunions once a year! (*Ten Great Preachers*, “God’s Dysfunctional Family,” Wm. Willimon, p. 152.)

No family is perfect. No family is without its struggles. Ernest Hemingway illustrated that in a powerful way in his short story entitled "The Capital of the World." Some of you may have read it. It's the story of a father and his teenage son. The son had sinned against his father and, in his shame, had run away from home. His father searched all over the country for him, but could not find him. Finally, in the biggest city in their country, in desperation, the father placed an ad in the daily newspaper. The ad read - "Paco - meet at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa" The father prayed that maybe his son would see the ad and maybe, just maybe, come to the hotel.

Well, on Tuesday at noon, the father arrived at the Hotel Montana and he could not believe his eyes. Police officers had been called out to keep order among 800 young boys named "Paco" who had come to meet their father. 800 boys had read the ad and hoped it was for them. 800 Pacos came to receive the forgiveness they so desperately needed. (daveburchett.com)

You see, no family is perfect. No family. So don't expect that of your's or of yourself. It puts a lot of pressure on family members to expect perfection when we don't have it in us, and too often, instead of bringing out the best in us, that expectation pushes us apart.

So the first insight from this lesson is - relax! No family is perfect. Secondly, I want to suggest that Jacob and Esau's family story shows us that no situation is hopeless. Quite frankly, it started out looking really hopeless. I mean, Jacob stole Esau's birthright out from under him - he duped him out of his inheritance - which was huge! No wonder he took off running in the opposite direction!

He duped Esau, he duped his father Isaac, he duped his father-in-law Laban - if there was someone to be duped - Jacob could do it! And if there was ever cause to cut someone out of your life forever - Esau, Isaac and Laban - had it. On the surface, this certainly looks like an absolutely, positively hopeless situation. This looks like Jacob will be on the outside looking in for the rest of his life.

And yet, the story ends, with reconciliation. Jacob, years later, surrounded by his wives and children and servants and livestock, returns to face his brother, ready to accept the consequences of his bad decisions and bad actions. He comes knowing it might cost him his life. He comes knowing that the years might have only increased his brother's rage. He comes knowing it could all be over.

But he is stunned, when expecting the worst, he gets the best. Instead of swords drawn, Esau comes to greet him with arms wide open to embrace him.

Which leads me to suggest a third thing, a very valuable thing we might glean from this story - and it is this: in family arguments, to come to a resolution, there doesn't need to be a winner and a loser. We don't hear Esau demanding an apology from Jacob. We don't hear him telling Jacob he has to earn his love. He just offers it.

Oh so often, for us, everything is win or lose. Someone always has to be the winner, and

someone else the loser. It's black and white. We're not comfortable with gray.

I learned about that one day in a most surprising way. I was talking to a colleague about something unfair that had happened to him. A supervisor had overstepped her bounds and interfered where she shouldn't have, and my friend had gotten hurt, but it eventually all blew over, and he let it go, but I couldn't. I said, "It isn't fair, she won." And you know what he said, "So what? In the scheme of things, so what." He helped me to see that in relationships that's a good question to ask yourself. "So what? What will it hurt if I let go of the anger and bitterness and just forgive without making a big deal over it?" I'll tell you, that was a life-changing conversation for me. We don't have to win all the time, and if we insist on it, we'll be lonely indeed. Esau didn't insist on it, instead he walked the way of reconciliation and let the past be the past.

Which leads me to my final thoughts on this story - and it is that I hope you see that what happened between Esau and Jacob is the very same thing that happens between us and our Lord. In how very many ways do we dupe Jesus, turn away from Him, disregard Him, take Him for granted, push Him out of the way when following Him is inconvenient for us? And yet, still, He loves us and offers us His love. Still He forgives us and offers us new life. When we deserve condemnation, He opens up His arms to embrace instead. He knows we're not perfect, He never expected us to be.

Friends, that's the Good News of the Gospel, and today especially, that's the Good News for all families. So let me close with words by a man named James Love, as he preached on this story himself. He said, "Listen, especially you who despair at life, at the messes in your life, messes that have happened to you, the messes that you have caused. As the text says, God is at work in ways that we can not imagine. If God can bring such a family of Isaac and Rebekah's to reconciliation, if God is willing to continue to wrestle with the church, and much of the world, if God is willing to take on the forces of death and destruction on the cross, if God is willing to bear the burden of death and our own human folly, then there is always hope. Hope for me, hope for you, hope for all the so called rotten sneaks in the world, and ultimately hope for the world itself."  
(jameslove.com)

Amen to that - there is always hope! Because we are children of a God who is bigger than all our problems, all our pettiness, all our rivalry, all our struggles. We are children of a God who can make a way where we can't see it, and can build a bridge where we have dug a chasm. There is always hope, and today, through this story, we celebrate the fact that there is always hope for families - no matter what! Thanks be to God!

Amen.