

“The Sons of Laughter”

Genesis 25:19-34

July 30, 2017

We are God’s chosen, all of us, warts and all, to be a blessing

Laughter had two sons, Hairy and Heels. That's not usually how we name them, but that's what their names mean. We've talked before about how the name Isaac means “Laughter” because when his birth was announced by the visiting angels, his mother Sarah, fell down laughing. So, when the boy was born, they named him Laughter. Many years later, when Isaac was beginning to get old, his wife was also unable to have children, they tried for twenty years before Rebekah finally conceived. But it was not easy. When she was pregnant, she felt within her the problems that would only increase when her sons were born. She gave birth to twins, the first one showed up with a full head of hair and so they named him Esau, which means Hairy. His brother, the younger twin came into the world with his hand on his brother’s heel and so they named him Jacob, which means heel, or it could mean the one who tries to take anothers place. Hairy and Heels, Jacob and Esau, as different as twins could be. They look differently, they act differently, they are constantly fighting with one another, one wouldn’t even know they were from the same family. But they are, they are brothers.

Every family has stuff like this. Every family has stuff. I discovered that truth with the first wedding I ever officiated. When I was a senior in seminary, my best friend Dave got engaged. He and his fiancé, Celeste, were hoping that I would land a job and get ordained soon after I graduated so that I could officiate at their wedding. I did, and so their wedding turned out to be my first. In preparing for the wedding, we got into many discussions about their plans, what they wanted for their life together, and of course, we talked about their families. Now Dave had been my best friend since high school, but I had always secretly envied Dave. It was not easy having Dave as a best friend. Dave was smart, he was good looking, he was an accomplished musician, he was an Eagle Scout, and he had a wonderful

family. I was envious of his family. Just like mine, Dave came from a family of four children, three boys and then a girl who was the youngest. But my parents were divorced, while Dave's seemed to be wonderfully in love. His brothers all seemed to get along, be well adjusted, love their sister and be respectful of their parents. But before their wedding Dave and Celeste began to talk about what they wanted for their family and the conflicts that they had experienced started to come out. And I discovered that every family has "stuff." This perfect family that I had envied for years, wasn't perfect—they had conflicts, they had issues, they had "stuff." It's true of my family, it's also true of yours. We all have stuff. None of us are perfect parents. None of us were perfect children. We have families that struggled, that fought, that had problems, and we all have the scars to prove it.

It just as true in the Bible. There is no good example in the Bible of a perfect family. If you want to find "family values," the Bible stories are not good places to look for them. Cain and Abel, Noah and his sons, David and his brothers, Abraham and Sarah, they all have their problems, their stuff. None of them are perfect, least of all Isaac and Rebekah's family. Think about when you grew up, or think about your children. Did you have "mom's kids" and "dad's kids?" Did you gravitate toward mom or dad? Did mom tend to prefer some children and not others? How about dad? That's usually not a great situation, when some children feel preferred above others. It's really not good when there are just two children in a family and one parent chooses to love one and the other parent chooses to love the other. Family relationships are hard enough without setting up a conflict between children and parents like that. But that's exactly what happens in Isaac and Rebekah's family. We are told that Isaac loved Esau. And what's not to love. Everyone would love Esau. He's the kind of guy who gets everyone's attention. He's tall, he's the outdoors type, he's in the moment. He laughs out loud, slaps you on the back, is always ready to have fun. When you're done with work for the day, he's the guy you want to hang around with. He's the one who attracts the girls, he's always ready to lend a hand or tell a joke. Everyone loves Esau. But Rebekah prefers Jacob. He's quiet, he likes to stay in the tent. He doesn't

really like to hunt or hang around with the guys. He doesn't have a lot of friends, he's a mama's boy. They are the classic introvert-extravert. They are set up for conflict. And conflict they have. Esau is a man of the moment. And so, when he comes in from the field one day and is overcome with hunger, he sees that Jacob has a pot of red beans cooking over the fire. "Let me have some of that," he says. "What will you give me?" says his brother. They may have re-acted this scene many times as boys. "I want that, let me try that, I don't have one of those!" "What will you give me for it?" And so Jacob says, "I want to be the older brother. Let me be the first, let me be the oldest brother in the family." "What do I care about that? I'm hungry!" It doesn't matter who's older when they are twins, does it? Of course not, at least not until their father dies and one of them will inherit twice as much as the other. But that's years in the future and Esau is hungry now. So, he says "fine." He had the food and was happy. But in a later chapter the situation gets worse. Isaac thinks his years are coming to an end and before he goes he wants to pass on God's blessing, God's promise, God's covenant to his son. But which one? To his favorite of course, to Esau. So he sends Esau out into the fields to hunt for his favorite game, then prepare it just as he likes and then he will give Esau the blessing. But Rebekah overhears all of this, tells her favorite Jacob and they prepare the meal first. Jacob knows that his father's eyesight is failing, so he thinks he can pass himself off as Esau. But remember that Esau is a hairy man and Jacob is not. Rebekah helps Jacob tie some animal skins to his arms and to the back of his neck and when they bring the meal in to Isaac, he feels his son whom he believes to be Esau and so pronounces God's blessing upon him. Jacob cheats Esau out of the blessing and he had already taken his birthright. Jacob gets to be the oldest, he gets the blessing, he gets to be the one through whom the covenant with God is passed. And when Esau hears about it, he threatens to kill his brother. And so, Jacob has to run away. But the blessing has gone to him, and as we hear from later stories, he is the one that God talks to, he is the one who inherits the promise of the land, he becomes the father of the chosen people.

Why him? Why does God choose Jacob? Why not Esau? If you think about it, this is a common

occurrence in the stories in the Bible, the preference for the younger child. God chooses Abel over Cain. He chooses Isaac over Ishmael. He chooses David, who is the youngest of his brothers. Why do you think that is? Why does God do that? Why choose Jacob over Esau? Why choose the weaker one, the less popular, the less out-going? Maybe that is the reason. Maybe God chooses that which the world doesn't value at first glance. The disadvantage of choosing Esau is that those who are powerful, or have wealth, or worldly advantages sometimes will think that they deserve God's blessing. St. Paul says in I Corinthians, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

Did God choose Jacob precisely because he was not the firstborn, because he was the weaker of the two brothers? God chooses Jacob—I don't know that we really know why, given all of Jacob's moral failings.

We can say this: God chooses with an eye to peace. God may divide, but only so the uniting can be stronger. Jacob and Esau spend years at each other's throats, as the peoples represented in this story in later years, Edom and Israel would fight for generations. But in this story of brothers, Jacob and Esau do not end up like Cain and Abel. That's what I'm amazed by in the end of this story, the forgiveness. When Esau is cheated out of his birthright and his blessing by his younger brother, he is mad. But he overcomes that. He doesn't dwell on his misfortune or persist in planning schemes of revenge. Instead, after Jacob, the one who grabbed his heel in infancy and grabbed what was his by right as an adult, takes off with his blessing, Esau overcomes his grief. He overcomes his desire for revenge. Years later, when Jacob returns to the promised land after years with his uncle Laban, now a rich man, blessed with wives and eleven sons and many herds and flocks, Jacob expects to be met with anger. Instead he is met with grace by a man who has overcome his past. When they meet the story says, "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept."

Esau is a man who has come to embrace those he once pushed away, a man who has overcome his regret, overcome his desire for vengeance. Maybe in the end, he came to understand that he too had been blessed. He too had been chosen. Chosen perhaps to teach Jacob forgiveness? Maybe to teach us

the same?

So, this is the family that God has chosen. This is the family of God in all its gory detail: prayer and miraculous conception, yes; but also, brothers who fight from conception, parents who divide their loves, one brother who from birth tries to take the other's place. It is precisely here, among these people, where God works to save the world. And just so with us. We are the family of God too. And we certainly have our "stuff," in the families we live with and here in this church family also. But we are chosen. All of us. Remember that God does not choose Israel merely for privilege. God chooses Israel for responsibility. In the beginning, God chose Abraham not for privilege but for the responsibility of being a blessing to the nations and teaching future generations the ways of the Lord. God chose Israel to be a light to the nations. God's election of Israel and, in time, of the church that is engrafted onto Israel, is not for the purpose of self-serving elitism but for the purpose of mission."

We can think about this in terms of American history. In the seventeenth century those who first colonized the Massachusetts Bay Colony understood chosenness as a part of the covenant with God due not to their goodness or deserving nature but only to God's will and grace. John Winthrop, first governor of the colony reminded the early settlers in 1630 that to be chosen meant "chosen for the good of the neighbor." Sadly, in time some Americans changed this to mean that God chose the American people for special privilege in the world. Remember learning in school about "manifest destiny," that idea that determined American policies in the 19th century, that God had chosen Americans to be God's people and to take possession of all the land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, in order to fulfill what they considered their God-given destiny, no matter who was on that land at the time? That sense of responsibility had given way to privilege and the assumption of divine right.

Don't we continue to wrestle with the temptation of privilege? God's choice of the church, however, says much more about the goodness of God than the goodness of the church. There are no good grounds for boasting. Being chosen is never intended to be an election to privilege but an election to responsibility. In one of his letters, St. Peter announces, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a

holy nation, God's own people, *in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness.*" (1 Pet. 2:9)

What about us? What about you and me? Didn't God choose us? Of course he did. Through his Spirit he calls each one of us to be here, to receive God's love and care, to know that God has picked us. Why? Because we are the most handsome or prettiest? Because we are the wealthiest or the most talented? Because we are of a higher moral character than everyone outside the church? No, none of those reasons, we all have stuff that we need to live with. We are chosen not out of our merit but simply because of God's love. We're like the mustard seed. Not so much to look at, but we grow and remember that the point of the mustard seed parable is not just that it starts small and grows into something great, but it grows so that the birds come and makes nests in its branches. We are here to be a blessing to those around us. Remember that's what we said about Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing. We are called to be a blessing to our families, to one another, to the community around us, to the people we work with, to the person we encounter on the street. How do we bless them? We've received love and grace from God, what do we do in return? Do we ignore others, wrapped in our own concerns each day, or do we smile, encourage, say hello, hope to make a day brighter? Do we treat strangers with respect, curiosity, and care, knowing that thereby some have entertained angels? Do we pray for each other, for our church, for the efforts of our staff and volunteers, knowing that if we aren't up for leading Vacation Bible School next week, we can certainly pray for those who are? Do we forgive, knowing that we have been forgiven? Our theme for Bible School next week is "Created by God, Built for a Purpose." All of us are chosen, warts and all. This family is chosen, this church is chosen, not because of our size or our wealth or because we are perfect. We have our "stuff." But we also have a purpose. God has created us and called us together as a covenant community for a purpose, to love and to restore—our world, our relationships, our communities. Jacob and Esau were in conflict separated for twenty years, but they were restored to each other. When they met again after all those years, Jacob said to Esau as they wept in each other's arms, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." To be the loving face of God to each other. To be the reconciling face of God to the people we meet. To be the healing hands of God to the creation around us. That's why we're here.