

Sermon on Gen. 25:19-34: Jacob and Esau

October 31, 2010

For the past 30 years or so, the political conversation in our nation has included the phrase “family values.” While nearly everyone would support “family values,” the meaning of those words depends on who is speaking them. Conservatives tend to think in terms of being pro-life and opposing pornography, pre-marital relations, and depictions of violence in the media. Liberals on the other hand have used “family values” to promote access to abortion, gay marriage, and condom distribution in public schools. “Family values” has the exact opposite meaning for those on opposite ends of the social and political spectrum.

Still others talk of “family values” when they’re advocating a living wage for families, safe and affordable childcare, programs for single-parent families, and parent-friendly employment laws that provide maternity leave. In the media, “family values” are usually interpreted to mean Christian morality in a traditional family with two married parents. But a 1988 Harris survey defined “family values” very simply as “loving, taking care of, and supporting each other” while “knowing right from wrong and having good morals,” and many Americans agreed with those ideas.

So how would you define “family values?” //// Whatever your opinions are about what a family is, and what a family ought to be, the Scriptures have a great deal to say about family values. Our Scripture today is about a family: Isaac and Rebekah, and their two sons, Jacob and Esau. While we may not leave here today with a full-fledged definition of family values, we will clearly see the place the Lord has in the lives of families who desire to love and obey Him.

**Gen. 25:19-34, p. 26**

<sup>19</sup> This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac,<sup>20</sup> and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram, and sister of Laban the Aramean.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.<sup>22</sup> The babies jostled

each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

<sup>23</sup> The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

<sup>24</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. <sup>25</sup> The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. <sup>26</sup> After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

<sup>27</sup> The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. <sup>28</sup> Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. <sup>30</sup> He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

<sup>31</sup> Jacob replied, "First, sell me your birthright."

<sup>32</sup> "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

<sup>33</sup> But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

<sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Every year around Christmas I look forward to getting Christmas photocards, especially from friends that I haven't seen in person for a while. Each card shows how the children have grown over the past year, and also how this friend has grayed and that friend has lost a little more hair up top. Usually everybody in the photo is smiling, and I can guess in general terms about how their lives are going. But you know as well as I do that the photo doesn't tell the whole story. From just a snapshot, I don't know many details about their lives, especially on a daily basis.

Obviously we don't have photos of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau, but what we do have is a word snapshot that tells us volumes about who they were as people. We already know a bit about Isaac from the passage last week. He showed great trust and calm as his father Abraham bound his hands, and hoisted him up to be a sacrifice to the Lord. We also know that from God's perspective, Isaac was a child of promise, through whom many nations would be blessed.

What we know about Rebekah comes mainly from a passage that immediately precedes the one I just read. Abraham desires to find just the right girl for his only son, as any parent would. So Abraham sends a servant to find that girl, explicitly asking the Lord to guide his steps and show him without a doubt who the Lord wanted Isaac to marry. Abraham could have picked out somebody, and Isaac could have as well. But they desired the God's guidance about the woman He had chosen for Isaac, and the Lord points the servant to Rebekah.

With this in mind, our passage today starts with a few curiosities I'd like to note. Verse 20 tells us that Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah. Since most men at that time married when they were between 18 and 20, Isaac was quite unusual in waiting for the right person that God would provide. In fact, some Jewish writings state that if a man isn't married by the age of 20, he must be cursed by God. But Abraham and Isaac both knew that the opposite is true. Isaac was actually greatly blessed by God; he just had to wait for the Lord to give him the right girl. Isaac knew that God had promised to provide children to him to fulfill the covenant with his father. So regardless of what others might have thought about his unusually extended time of singleness, he was content to wait for the Lord to provide a wife.

I wonder what Isaac first thought when it became clear that the wife God had given him was barren, as we're told in verse 21. Just as with his parents, God would be the one who would have to come through, to carry on Abraham's lineage in a miraculous way. Isaac himself was living proof of God's power to provide against impossible odds, despite how bleak things looked for Abraham and Sarah, regardless of the times when it seemed God had forgotten His promises and His covenant. All Isaac had to do was feel the pulse pumping through his veins to remember God's sovereign power, and God's absolute faithfulness. So Isaac and Rebekah both show their faith and trust in the Lord.

They want a child, and want to be part of God's plan to create for Himself a chosen people.

So what does Isaac do? //// Isaac prays. And the Lord answered his prayer with a "yes." The barren wife gives birth, not just to one boy, but two. They are doubly blessed. But note verse 26. Since Isaac was 60 when his sons were born, we know it took 20 years for the Lord to answer the prayers of their hearts' desire. Just like Abraham and Sarah, they had to wait for the Lord's timing. But unlike Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah didn't try to push the Lord's hand by having a child through a concubine. They learned from that example of impatient unfaithfulness, and instead trusted the Lord to provide in His way, in His time.

Isaac's faith and prayerfulness are confirmed, and we can say the same about Rebekah. Here is a woman who has never had a child before, bearing twins at at least the age of 34. Obviously she couldn't have a sonogram to see why there was such a great commotion inside of her, so she was understandably worried. The Hebrew that is used to describe the jostling in her womb conveys the sense that the unborn children were abusing and crushing each other, and oppressing her. With so much discomfort she may have been concerned for their health, and whether the children of God's promise would survive the pregnancy with her. With all of this on her heart, she goes to the Lord in prayer.

Rebekah's prayer is simply, "Why is this happening to me?" "What's going on here?" I wonder whether Rebekah regrets hearing from the Lord that her sons will spend their lives battling each other. But the Lord's answer does teach her several things. First, Rebekah's sons will survive the pregnancy. Second, their futures are in His hands. Third, they will be the leaders of strong nations, even though they will be at odds. And last, and most importantly, the promise God made to Abraham and then to Isaac will be carried on according to divine wisdom. In other words, her pain and sacrifice as a mother does have a purpose, and that purpose is under God's control.

Even though Isaac and Rebekah were faithful to the Lord, we might question their parenting style. Since they knew their sons would always be at odds, it wasn't exactly wise for each parent to favor one son over the other, and heighten the tension between the boys. Jacob and Esau are also described as having very different interests. Esau is a

boisterous, hairy, red-haired outdoorsman who in non-Biblical Jewish records was also a womanizer. Jacob was probably a shepherd, a homebody, a quiet man who is noted to have integrity that's tinged with wiliness and cunning. We know from our own experience in this congregation that twins can look and act quite differently, and Jacob and Esau are no exception.

But the differences between Jacob and Esau go beyond looks and personality, and that fact leads us through the rest of this passage. We need to remind ourselves that the firstborn son in this time usually received a double-portion of the inheritance from his father. This was partly because the firstborn was seen to be the first and best blessing from God. The firstborn was also naturally the oldest, so he would mature first and then have the responsibility of caring for the rest of the family. His double portion was not aimed at making him wealthier than other siblings, but at ensuring he could provide for the entire clan, including unmarried women, in-laws, and children. The privilege of being the firstborn also carried tremendous responsibilities, including serving as the religious leader for his entire family. Just as Isaac looked to Abraham as a moral example, Isaac's sons would look to him, and so forth.

This is partly why this account of Jacob, Esau, and the stew is important. Through Esau's behavior we learn that he is rude, impulsive, and lacks the wisdom to plan for his future, and to see the trick his brother is playing on him. Jacob pounces on his brother's weaknesses to secure for himself the honor and blessing of being the firstborn son. Esau exaggerates that he is starving to death, and Jacob makes a deal: Lentil stew for your birthright. Apparently, Esau shows no hesitation or compunction. It's a deal.

What we need to focus on here is not that Esau valued stew more than his inheritance. Esau's "family values" first of all dishonored his father Isaac, who expected to pass along his inheritance to his favorite son. Aside from hurt feelings, Esau basically sent the message that all Isaac had been blessed with and worked for his whole life was worth less than a bowl of stew and a piece of bread. And by extension, Esau was also dishonoring his mother and the entire extended family. He disregarded family tradition and disrespected them all by casually tossing his future as the family patriarch aside.

But far more crucially, when Esau despised his birthright, he despised the Lord. He would have known the promise God had made to his father and grandfather, to make their

family a nation as numerous as the stars. But who cares?! So what?! Esau shows that he has no desire to be part of God's plans. Instead of looking upon his life spiritually, he can only see the tangible and practical. What good are God's promises to me now, when I'm starving to death? Gimme that bowl of red stuff so I can scarf it down like an animal, which is how the Hebrew phrases it.

When we turn to think about how this Word from the Lord applies to our lives today, we are helped by a portion of Hebrews 12. <sup>14</sup>"Make every effort to live in peace with all people, and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup>See to it that no one misses the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. <sup>16</sup>See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. . . . Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our "God is a consuming fire."

Esau had the opportunity to obey the Lord and be used by Him in the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. Not only did he turn away from the Lord, he trashed the gift of faith in God's promises that was offered right before His eyes. The author of Hebrews reminds us that we, too, can have the Lord's mercy and blessings right before our very eyes, yet fail to see them, and turn away. As I read from Hebrews 12:15, we become blind to the Lord's grace when we allow bitterness to take root and defile us. Our thoughts can become so stuck in the muck and mire of life that we cannot look up from them to see hope and joy in the face of Christ. We may become sexually defiled, or spiritually defiled as Esau was. Then this bitter root impacts others, who can be dragged down by our pessimism. And who would want to be a Christian if our witness of the Lord is darkened by griping and unbelief? If we can't trust the Lord, why should we tell others to?

Hebrews teaches that our healthy alternative is to live in peace with everyone; the Greek implies that Christians actively pursue and preserve peace, whether in our families, our places of work, or our churches. But peace with God is most important. When we seek holiness, we treasure the gift of faith that the Lord has mercifully offered to us, and praise the Savior who secured redemption for us. He alone is our focus, and with our eyes upon Him we will not be defiled. If we are humble, thankful, peace-filled, and blameless,

our worship of the Lord will be full of reverence and awe, just as He desires and deserves.

These are some of the lessons about family values we can take from Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. But there is one theme that underlies all of those lessons: faith in the Lord. This is where our earlier reading from Romans 9 comes in. While only the Lord knows who He has called to eternal life, He offers the gift of faith to everyone. Some are like Esau, and reject the gift. Others are like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and receive it, cultivate it, and cherish it. Just as our Reformation forebears reminded us, faith is a gift from God that we do not earn, and cannot earn. Christ is the only one who could secure our salvation, and only through faith in Him do we receive forgiveness and the sure promise of eternal life.

So the family values we take from this account of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau start with faith. Hebrews 11 teaches that “faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” Isaac and Rebekah believed the precious truth that absolutely nothing is impossible with God. Like Abraham, they took that faith and put it into action by asking the Lord to open her womb, and bless them with a child. They waited patiently for 20 years for the Lord to answer, but they trusted that He would. And when He did, He blessed them doubly. When we trust and obey, when we cherish our gift of faith and put it into action, our heavenly Father rejoices and blesses us richly. When we look beyond what we see with our physical eyes, and look to the Lord with eyes of faith, He shows Himself to be faithful and true.

Do you believe with all of your heart and mind that absolutely nothing is impossible for God? If your answer is yes, then rejoice with me that the person of faith can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. If your answer is an honest no, then ask the Lord to heal your unbelief. Turn away from whatever bitterness has taken root in your heart, and turn toward the open arms of a Savior who wants your faith to shine as brightly as a city on a hill.

May your faith in Christ, your love for God, and your deep joy be so abundant and obvious that no one will doubt whose family you belong to. May everyone you meet see through your faith that you are a child of God, a servant in His Kingdom, and that the Lord's family values are yours. *Let us pray.*