

BROKEN

GENESIS 25:19-35

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau (which means Hairy). ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob (which means Heel). Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Most of us grew up in semi functional, partly crazy families. I used to tell my kids before they would go out in public, “Remember, as far as anyone knows, we are a nice, normal family.” Someone else once said “Insanity does not run in my family. Rather, it strolls through, taking its time, getting to know everyone personally.”

That’s why I always laugh when I hear someone spout off about “Biblical Family Values.” Most if not all families in the Bible were more dysfunctional than our current Federal government. The most truthful thing we can say about most families is that they are “Flaws stitched together with the best of intentions.”

When I was in graduate school in Texas a friend of mine asked me to help him sift through county court records to learn about his family of origin. Bob was adopted and grew up in Oregon, but he was born in Texas and he wanted to meet his biological parents. We discovered that his father had died, but his mother and a couple of siblings lived nearby. Bob courageously contacted them and arranged to meet them, and it turned into a family reunion. After meeting them Bob told me how grateful he was that he had been removed from his biological parents, and he was even more grateful to his parents who had adopted him.

You remember the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how God had promised them offspring more numerous than the stars, and that Sarah was infertile and she laughed when in her 90’s she heard God say that she and Abraham would have children. Sarah told Abraham that he should lay down with one of their slaves and have a child, so Abraham frolicked with Hagar who bore a son named Ishmael. But because of the jealousy between Sarah and Hagar Abraham sent her and her son far away.

Finally Sarah conceived and she gave birth to Isaac. Eventually Sarah died, but Abraham remarried and had six more sons with his new wife, Keturah. Just as Abraham had dismissed Hagar and their son Ishmael, he sent his other six sons from Keturah away and shut them all out of his will. Isaac inherited everything from his father’s vast wealth, and as far as I know he had no contact with his 7 half siblings.

When Isaac was 40 his father took note that Isaac had never married, so he arranged a marriage between Isaac and Isaac’s cousin Rebekah whom he had never met. Like his mother Sarah, Rebekah was also infertile so Isaac prayed to God and

God opened up her womb. As someone once said, you have to be careful what you pray for because you may get more than you bargained for, and that's exactly what Rebekah got. Rebekah conceived twins, and the fetuses battled in her womb to the point that she regretted ever getting pregnant. After nine months of war in her womb, she gave birth to sons Esau and Jacob. Esau was reddish in color and was also very hairy, while Jacob was the apple of his mother's eye. Esau grew up to be an excellent outdoors man and hunter favored by his father, while Jacob stayed home with his mother and learned to cook and handle the domestic affairs.

It would be safe to say that Esau was like many teenage boys whose brains are lodged in their stomachs. Ravaged from a day of working outdoors, he came home and demanded that his slightly younger brother feed him dinner. Jacob was a trickster, a trait he probably learned from his mother, so he told Esau that he would gladly feed him if he would trade his birthright for a bowl of red stew. Esau was not the sharpest knife in the drawer or the brightest bulb on the porch. Resorting to hyperbole, like when your teenage daughter says she would rather die than wear the clothes you bought for her, Esau tells Jacob that unless he eats immediately he will die, so he pinky swears over his inheritance to his conniving brother. Now with his belly full, Esau goes back out to hunt, not caring that he had just given away his vast future inheritance.

We all have skeletons in our family closets, and for some of us it doesn't take much digging. Divorce, affairs, abuse, bitter sibling rivalry, unwanted pregnancies, criminal activity, drug and alcohol addictions, and some of these things can lead to permanent damage. The truth is no family is perfect or free of problems. We are all, in one way or another, products of broken homes, broken people. And the reality is, all of us, somewhere in our own psyche, are broken people.

When Isaac was blind and dying, his wife Rebekah devised a devious plan for Jacob to pretend to be Esau and ask Isaac to give him the family blessing. When it was accomplished Esau found out and threatened to kill Jacob, who had to escape. But Jacob got his comeuppance when he fell in love with his cousin Rachel and asked his uncle Laban if he could marry her. Laban made a deal that if Jacob would be his servant he could have Rachel, but then after 7 years and on the wedding night, Laban slipped his older and less attractive daughter Leah under the

sheets, tricking Jacob. Jacob then had to serve Laban another 7 years before securing Rachel.

So what are we to make of these completely messed up biblical families, the cornerstone from which Judaism,, Christianity, and partly Islam arose? Maybe one of the main points is that God prefers to work with flawed individuals and families to bring about God's kingdom. God seems to prefer flawed, broken, and ordinary people to bring about his saving grace in our world. God uses statistical improbabilities, challenges of infertility, deviant behavior, and unfair practices to bring about change in our world, and we, who are broken, can find our place and role in the story of God's salvation.

I'm not normal, but you already know that, and neither are you. When we learn to accept that, and even embrace it, we come to realize that we are no better than anyone else and thus there is no place in us to judge or discriminate against others. We are broken, the products of squirrely families. We have skeletons in our closet we work so hard to keep shut. I like what George Bernard Shaw said about family skeletons: If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you might as well make it dance.