

A STRUGGLE FROM THE START

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

July 13, 2008

Scripture: Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:19, 18-23

Two boys in one family, Biblically speaking, is almost always a problem. Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, were mixing it up from the start. The jealous brothers of Joseph despised their father's gift of a glorious coat of many colors given to their baby brother. And the rivalry between the protagonists of today's lesson, Jacob and Esau was so intense that the writer of Genesis tells us they were having wrestling matches even in their mother's womb. "The children struggled within her," the Genesis writer notes, and Rebecca, their mother spoke for many a woman who has carried twins to full term, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"

The question, (the Hebrew phrase is *Im ken, lamah zeh anokhi?*) can be translated either as "Why am I thus?" or "If thus, why me?"

We are not sure what the "this" is that Rebecca questions. Is it the pain of pregnancy? Is her lament that she is to be the mother of warring children? Or is this just an elemental protest against life's many cruelties?¹

Whatever it is, we can understand that it is difficult to endure dissension in the family, sibling rivalry, competition and jealousy. Somehow it always hurts more when it's in the family, because inside the house we know where the buttons are and how and when to push them.

The writer of Genesis leaves nothing to the imagination. The boys fight in Rebecca's womb, elbowing one another, squirming this way and that to gain an advantage, or to find a sconch more room. And when Rebecca delivers them, Esau comes out first with Jacob a close second, while Jacob is holding onto Esau's foot. Now that tells you a lot right there.

Their life together will be an ongoing rivalry with Jacob consistently gaining the upper hand, proof positive that to those who *have* will more be given. Jacob is gifted with the gift of gab, a flair for the dramatic, an ingenuity that will work the angles in such a way as to make things work in his favor. He will ace out his brother from the family blessing trading Esau's birthright for a bowl of potage. He will make off with the family jewels, the household goods, and hide them from his kinsman Laban. He will escape Esau's plot against his life.

He will take two wives, the result of the tables turned on him by a scheming father in law; and he will also have a concubine, Bilbah, with all of the responsibilities and complications thereunto appertaining. He will live by his wits, a trait found annoying in most people, but which in him will be deemed a blessing by God, a sign of his giftedness.

His brother, poor Esau will live in Edom, estranged from Jacob the remainder of his days, favored by his father, though he is not able to parlay that favor into blessing. He is a drone in comparison to his more imaginative and over-achieving brother. And from the womb onward they bring pain to their mother Rebecca.

There are a lot of sermons that might be preached about these old rivals, about sibling competition, and why Jacob is blessed and Esau is not, and how difficult it is for two headstrong brothers like this to get along together under one roof. A lot of sermons in there, and Sarah McCaslin is planning to take you there a couple of times in the weeks ahead.

But today I want to think about those two boys at such polar opposites, Jacob and Esau, who from their mother's womb were unable to settle life together, and who contested all their lives, until at last they lived in adjoining lands but not together.

Last week I spoke of the General Assembly and I described a picture of a diverse Presbyterian denomination, people from many places with different backgrounds, united by one invitation, "Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." I spoke of the personal comfort and encouragement that we are all seeking from the church, and how the church itself, at times, can be a part of what makes us heavy laden and gives us no rest. It was a sermon meant to focus us inward and root us again in the personal and theological issues that shape our lives; what it is about ourselves that needs rest and restoration in God's enfolding arms.

But the story of Jacob and Esau, pushes back into the larger issues of rival realities in the Presbyterian church today, twin children of the same womb that vie and contest against one another and have done so for many a long year; thirty years at least, if not longer, but thirty years no less since Bill Silver, a candidate for the ministry in New York City Presbytery dared to ask the Candidates Committee here whether one could be a self-affirming gay person and be called to ministry. Ever since, the church has contested within the womb of the Presbyterian fold to understand the moral requirement of leadership in the church and what it is to be called to ministry.

In the most recent General Assembly in San Jose, there were a number of issues in that regard that were settled and one important one that was not. The General Assembly passed an overture, known as the John Knox Overture, named for the presbytery that offered it to the Assembly. It reaffirmed both the historic stance of the church which says that local presbyteries who know candidates best and who oversee candidates' preparation for ministry will continue to determine who shall be ordained as leaders in the church by applying national standards to individual persons on a case by case basis. Criticized by those on the right as leading to a church of no standards or at least uneven ones, it is nonetheless the historic, traditional, and Presbyterian way of examining candidates for Christian service.

By approving John Knox the Assembly also nullified a recent Permanent Judicial Commission decision and upheld the right of candidates to take exception to G-6.0106b, the provision in the Book of Order that upholds the requirement of celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage. That is a standard that applies to both clergy and to laity serving as elders and deacons, and while on the face of it, it sounds like an apple pie ideal and a good thing to embrace, it is the specific clause that is used to exclude gay and lesbian Presbyterians from leadership in the church as elders, deacons, and ministers of word and sacrament.

The Assembly also approved a new Authoritative Interpretation, sort of like an executive order, which nullified all previous Authoritative Interpretations that specifically

prevented gay and lesbian persons from the offices of the church. That was a sweeping move. And there is in fact, now, no barrier to a self affirming gay or lesbian person from ordination if the Session or presbytery agrees.

In one other action, the Assembly approved an overture to remove the wording of G-6.0106b and to offer new words in their place that will affirm fidelity to the standards of the church and a sincere effort to adhere to those standards, among them to be a person “of strong character, dedicated discipleship, ...love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord,” and calling those who serve to a “manner of life [which is] a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and the world.”² There is no mention of sexual orientation or conduct specifically noted in that requirement.

That amendment to the constitution is now referred to the 173 presbyteries around the country, a majority of whom must ratify that change in order for it to take effect. Whether or not such an amendment can gain a majority is unknown. Recent history would indicate that it is not likely. Twice before, in 1997 and in 2000, the presbyteries did not approve this change to the constitution. And only God knows whether eight years later a majority may approve. You will forgive me, please, if I am skeptical.

At the Assembly our theologically conservative brothers and sisters, like Esau, felt that their birthright had been stolen from them by clever and cunning liberal brothers and sisters. The truth is that for all of the organizing that all of the groups did, left and right of center there simply were more commissioners who were convinced that the church’s homophobia, latent and overt has been so hurtful to so many in the church that it was time to change it.

Many of us believe that people have lived so long under the threat of fear since 9/11 and have seen in the political sphere the impact of a culture of threat and fear that has caused significant change in the fabric of American law and life, that commissioners were unmoved by the threats of fear that many on the right in the church raised that there would be a mass exodus from the denomination, that churches would pull up and pull out of the Presbyterian Church.

Two years ago the same warning was expressed about the actions of the Assembly to approve the Theological Task Force Report and only thirty churches of the 11,000 Presbyterian congregations in the country actually left the denomination. That’s 2.7 tenth’s of one percent.

The reaction in the denomination has been swift and strong. Many on the right are saying that there will now be more civil court trials as churches seek to leave the denomination and take their property with them; that the church will be more divided than ever before, and that the liberal turn of the denomination will be the occasion of God’s wrath and punishment with diminishing numbers and the eventual death of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Like Mark Twain commenting on the newspaper story in the *New York Journal* about his being at death’s door, I think it important to reaffirm that the rumors of our demise are greatly exaggerated.

And like brothers (or sisters for that matter) with whom there is persistent jealousy, resentment, fear of favoritism, mistrust, and anger there is probably more

emotion and irrationality being expressed at this early stage of response than is helpful. Yet even so there is no question that this is a volatile and divisive issue in the national church. (Maybe we should be grateful that we are not Episcopalians. At least there is no African presbytery or any Bishop Akinola for us to run to, assuming any African presbytery would have us.)

I have come to believe that reasonable and faithful people may disagree about this issue of ordination. I also believe that we can disagree and be in the same church together. That in fact, the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's church requires that we learn how to live together even when we disagree. Mostly because there are always going to be people with whom we disagree and with whom it is hard to get along, *Esau and Jacob – hard to get along...* but in Christ it is not impossible. What is difficult is facing the truth about ourselves and about our church.

On earth there is no pure church. We are, all of us, a mixture of dust and glory. And the best we can ever do is to try to proximate in our living together as a church family the unity and peace that is exemplified in the life of Christ. In the church that expression will always be imperfect, but it should not stop us from striving to achieve it.

We cannot create a sinless church. Our leaders, officers, elders, deacons, and ministers will always, of necessity, be human, and therefore sinners. The question is, "Are there any sins that disqualify a person *prima facie* from all Christian leadership?" Maybe. But if the issue in doubt is simply sexual orientation, then the answer that I think we find in Christ is "No." Jesus, after all, had nothing to say about the issue. Not one word in all of his teaching about ethical and moral responsibility is ever uttered about sexual orientation. Divorce, oh yes... he had a few choice things to say about that. Injustice to children... really riled him up. The responsibility of the rich toward the poor... that was one of his favorite topics. But human sexual orientation... nary a word.

The church can never be pure if purity must be measured in the lives of those who are called to Christian service. John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago spoke about G-6.0106b, and the Constitution's attempt to create a church whose leadership is sinless. He said,

"The church conducted a very wide sweep in that amendment to its Constitution and in the process disqualified everyone I know from serving as an officer. Most conspicuously it specifically disqualified anyone who engages in sexual intimacy before marriage. At a time when 95% of the population has done just that — many with the person they eventually married, and aren't about to repent of — that's quite a stand to take....

The only persons being denied full inclusion in the church are homosexual persons who have decided they cannot and will not hide any longer. They were, of course, the target: everyone knows that now. And the Presbyterian Church has succeeded in wonderfully marginalizing them, excluding them, keeping itself pure and clean of their flawed leadership."

Then Buchanan went on to speak of the inclusive, forgiving, and welcoming church that we are meant to be, a church that is on its way;

“We’re going to get there. We’re going to get there because our children are already there. Mine simply roll their eyes — and as I’m packing my bags for General Assembly and say — “You’re not still talking about that, are you?” Business is already there. Education is there — even the military is almost there.

We shall overcome. Of that I am absolutely sure. ‘The arc of the gospel’ Walter Brueggemann says, “is inclusivity,” always reaching out to include the excluded, to bring in the marginalized, to welcome at the banquet table all who want to be there. We shall overcome, of that I am sure, not in spite of the Bible but because we have taken the Bible as seriously as possible, finally read as the Reformers understood, the particulars of the Bible in light of the whole.”³

The question is, how shall we live in the meantime? How shall we live as a church that is on its way to a destination the dimensions of which we already see from afar? How can we be Jacob to Esau in this time when the tension between us is so great?

We are brothers and sisters in the same family, children of Rebecca and Isaac. And because we are kin, we are vulnerable to each other, capable of inflicting hurtful wounds and saying mean spirited things. But God means us to be together, and we have been trying all this long time to find a way to do it more graciously.

I understand the hurt, the anger, and the frustration of those on the right who thought they had it all nailed down, and who for thirty years have been trying to keep it nailed down at every point where the edges were fraying and the nails had come loose and the arc was bending toward inclusivity while they were bent on exclusivity so that the church might be more pure.

Well the church is not pure, God help us, and its leaders are only human, and all are sinful and have fallen short of the glory of God. We are meant to be together, even when it’s hard to be so. We are still kin of the womb, born close, and held together by blood that binds us together always. Not our blood, but Christ’s blood. The life and love of Jesus poured out for our sake.

I pray that in this year that lies ahead as the presbyteries vote on amending the Constitution we all may do what will be best for the whole church, and not just for our particular presbytery (or region or closely held property). But that we may all bend in the direction that the gospel is leading, so that we may live together honoring each other’s difference, respecting each other’s integrity, and forgiving each other’s sinfulness as we have been forgiven in Christ.

It is the least that brothers and sisters can do for one another, and the only way that there can be peace in the family.

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¹ Noted in Karen Sapio’s Moveable Feast paper on this text, where she cites the insight of Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1996) p. 41.

² G-6.0106a, Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

³ John Buchanan, “A Church as Generous and Just”, Covenant Network luncheon speech, June 23, 2008.