

HE'S MY BROTHER

Genesis 25:19-34

A Sermon by Audrey Webber

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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Friends, this morning we are continuing to tackle our theme for this summer of “Not Such Ordinary Time.” As Barbara spoke about in her First Matters note this past Friday and as Mark spoke of last week, we are examining what it means to be in what we call “ordinary time” in the church calendar during a time in which our lives and world are very far from ordinary. What does it look like for each of us to lean into this season while also acknowledging the work we have to do? As some of you might know, the periods in our church calendar are sometimes defined by a particular theme. As we sit in ordinary time - or the green part of our liturgical calendar we could see it as a time for hope. Hope that God is still with us even during normal times. Hope that we will be there for one another.

As we think about this season we are in - a season when silence is not an option when our black and brown siblings are hurting. A season when we show our love and respect for our siblings by speaking out and lifting our sibling’s voices. Speaking out to tell the story of God’s love for us and one another. Acknowledging such deep hurt toward our siblings and that these severe injustices should not have occurred. Nor should silence have occurred. Nor should silence continue to occur. And as we hope for silence to end, we ask ourselves today this simple question:

Who is my brother?

As you heard IB read for us, today we sit together with another ordinary text. Ordinary though only in some sense - that it is about two brothers. That it includes birth, life, conflict, and existing with one another. You can quickly see, though, that these brothers have a very unordinary relationship just as so many of us do.

We find Jacob and Esau - fighting in the womb. It’s certainly a wild sight to imagine. Maybe those who have experienced being pregnant with twins can identify with this. I will tell you, my son - who just turned a year old last week - certainly seemed to be fighting in the womb. Kicking and flipping clearly playing a soccer game of some kind. If you have ever tried splitting up two fighting dogs, cats, children, or adults - you might have had a similar experience to that of Rebecca. This is not an ordinary time for her.

I’ve always been a fan of the cartoon “Tom and Jerry” - the cartoon about Tom the cat who lives what appears to be a pampered life and Jerry the mouse who lives in the same house always right alongside Tom. They enjoy their adventurous lives of tormenting one another and getting into all kinds of trouble. Who wouldn’t love a playful adversary like that? I know from being a die-hard Yankees fan, I have MANY adversaries for whom I am grateful!

While the slapstick of Tom & Jerry’s antics are fueled by being adversaries, there are many moments when one saves the other, or they mourn a presumed disaster of the other. For just a moment, they reveal how much the other matters to them. While the cat and mouse serve each other a bit differently, I like to think that Jacob and Esau could, and to some degree eventually *would*, have the playful and healthy rivalry that many siblings have. From the outset

of this story, though, we have to recognize that in some ways we are all both Jacob and Esau at different points in our lives. Although ultimately many of us are divided in terms of the privilege which Jacob receives compared to the mistreatment that Esau suffers, not only from his brother and parents, but also to those of us who give Esau a bad rap.

In a sermon he gave a couple years ago, Rev. Dr. Derrick McQueen who is the pastor at St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem says this of our text:

“There is only one problem that I find with this text. The problem that I have with this text is that here we are in one womb, coming from one mother, and rather than hear the words of God saying that one shall be stronger, and that one must serve the other, we hear that word *serve* and we think that one must be *on top* of the other. We think that there is some type of hierarchy that is planned by God for those who have and those who should not have...What we’re talking about is that very often we feel that God has placed the favorite to be favored and those who are not favorites, well, tough luck. But, that’s not the case. The case is when we serve one another – we help one another. We lift one another up. We give one [an]other life blood! That’s what we do. That’s what happened in the womb.”¹

I agree with Rev. Dr. McQueen - sometimes we get our translations pretty messed up - even the very characters in the story goof up the translation. Isaac and Rebekah certainly did not have the best familial history. Isaac’s father, Abraham, dumps Isaac’s half-brother Ishmael and later holds a knife over Isaac and is ready to sacrifice him before God stops him.

Both parents do not see so clearly as they each think it is perfectly appropriate to love one child more than another and arguably misunderstand the meaning of brothers serving one another. It is certainly not a great start for the brothers, but they of course play their own role in the story as well. God chose Jacob before he was born to serve one particular role (25:23), before he could display any particular behavior. It is not that one person is called to serve some and not be served - instead, our various callings and our roles should be reciprocal - our values should also reflect this.

What are the values that are non-negotiable? We have to ask these questions: How *much* am I willing to let slip by and not call out? What in my community, in my friends, in my family, in my own self needs to be talked about? If we are in a position of white privilege, how often have we taken the time to listen to Black voices? How much time have we spent talking about our privilege with our family no matter how uncomfortable it might be?

Jacob and Esau - an example of a bad family dynamic but even more they are an example of how privilege affects our world. We see this time and again in our lives where we see one person “win” because of who they are. Jacob knows it too. Later, Jacob will be *terrified* to see Esau again many years after their separation and after many more awful actions on Jacob’s part. Jacob knows in his heart that he was wrong all along to trick and to discredit his brother and to cause him to not have the same privileges that Jacob had. And where did it all start?

Yes, it started in the womb as God knew what would happen between them but really it started when Jacob believed it right to steal the things that belonged to Esau. Yet Jacob still got the glory - as is the case with many of us who are in a position of privilege.

¹ Rev. Dr. Derrick W. McQueen, *Dismantling Racism: Lessons from the Womb*, 2018

Regardless of what would later happen between them, though, we have to look at the initial actions occurring between these two brothers. How could it have been *shaped* differently? Eventually Jacob *will* recognize the privileges he has received in how he has been treated differently and although chosen by God, he ultimately uses that to hurt instead of help his brother: “Jacob's transformation reaches a climax when he comes into the presence of God and acknowledges, “I am not worthy”” (32:10).²

Ultimately, this story teaches us about what we *do* speaks volumes over what we *say*. This story teaches us the absolute need for those who are in a position of power and those in a position of privilege whether white privilege, economic privilege, or any privilege must serve others regardless of their position. Because these are lives we are talking about. These are our neighbors. Our friends. Our people. Our siblings in Christ. We cannot just stay silent and in turn be complicit. We voice many things in our church don't we? Things which are so very true. We say in the Lord's Prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” A piece of the mission statement of our Presbytery says, “As a manifestation of Christ's body, we proclaim God's Word and promote God's justice to all persons and in all places, public and private...” On our church's website under the “about us” section we say, “First Church believes strongly in an open and inclusive church that extends an unqualified welcome.”

After saying and agreeing with these statements, we could say yes it's good we say this, but is that what Christ really calls us to do? No. We are called to voice *and act* - each individually as well as collectively that “he is my brother” and “she is my sister” and they - that amazing person there - “they are my sibling.” And while we each live very different lives and I will never know her specific experience - I can understand her pain. I can understand disappointment, sadness, and fear. And I am going to stand up for her. I am going to stand up for my brother even if I'm awkward. Even if it's uncomfortable. Even if I don't feel that I am as articulate as others, I am going to try. I am going to try but not only am I going to try but I am going to *do* it. I am going to do what Christ calls each one of us. activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

We certainly see how the disciples messed up again and again and yet they still DID it! They were not Jesus - they were not the shepherd - and yet they still acted. They didn't have the same level of courage to flip the tables in the temple, they didn't have the same articulate words to preach to thousands of people this whole new way of life and to lift up the persecuted, they didn't have the faith to even voice Jesus' name at times, but they still did it. They knew in their hearts the quote by Dr. Cornel West: “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.” They knew that lifting up others and actively doing something was necessary otherwise would they really be living out their faith? Jacob eventually knew this too. Jacob knew that just being brothers does not make for true brotherhood or sisterhood. We certainly see that in our own experiences. We see that this pair of brothers do not end like the brothers of Cain and Abel. This is a very different story. Later Jacob would say these words of Esau, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”³

When was the last time we checked what our siblinghood looks like? Who do I call my brother? Who would I call my sister? What do our siblings look like and how am I going to be a

² Dave Bland, David L. Bartlett (2013). *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Westminster John Knox Press.

³ Genesis 33:10

better sibling? I challenge each of us to make our own family tree - not our biological family tree - but to name those who you would call your sister or brother. Who is a part of that tree? The names of some close friends maybe, some of your church family, maybe some neighbors?

Now can we grow that tree? Will I put George Floyd? Will I put Breonna Taylor? Because by growing our family tree not only do we become better global citizens and we support our siblings but I promise this - we will see the face of God. You will see the face of God just as Jacob saw in his brother Esau. Then - once we have written our family tree, we have to ask ourselves - who have I then left off of my tree? Who is it that God is asking me to write down - who are the people that God would put on God's family tree? And then ask the question: What is it that I will do to make it a better world for each of those people on my tree? And then how will I protect my neighbors from those on my family tree who have hurt my neighbors? Because just as we are protected by God - God asks us to love and protect our neighbors.

We do this because God does it for each one of us. Every moment of our lives God's love covers us no matter what we do and calls us God's child. So we too are called to call others our siblings in Christ. She is my sister. He is my brother. She is my sister. He is my brother. Amen.