

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
July 16, 2017

“Beyond Winning and Losing”

“... 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.”
Genesis 25:23

PRELUDE

During the weeks of summer,
I've opted for us to focus attention
upon lessons that come from
the book of Genesis.

Genesis – the first book of the Bible.

Genesis – which speaks of first things,
“in the beginning.”

Genesis – which offers us a primeval history
to account for our origins, a mythical
framework to understand “**once upon a time,**”
when the world was without form and void,
when the God who makes all things new
first called the worlds into being.

Genesis – wherein God assigns promise
and affixes presence to a migrant people
through whom all the families of
earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

Our lesson this morning moves us into
yet another beginning,
the advent of a new generation.

The first generation has passed.

Sarah, mother of Isaac, is gone; she died,
having lived for 127 years (Genesis 23).

Abraham negotiated a purchase of property
from Ephron the Hittite,
and bought a burial place,
and there laid Sarah to rest.
We know the place today as Hebron.
Hebron has been in the news recently.
The United Nations declared Hebron
a Palestinian World Heritage Site,
a move that angered the State of Israel.
The Tomb of the Patriarchs is located in Hebron,
as well as the Ibrahimi Mosque;
it is a holy and revered site for Muslims and Jews.

A complex of buildings form the shrine/tomb(s)
that date to some 2,000 years ago, when the ruler
of the land was the great king, Herod - which
makes it the oldest continuously used intact
prayer structure in the world, and the oldest
major building in the world that still fulfills
its original function (This is Wikipedia trivia!).
The history, of course, goes back far, far
deeper into time.

In more recent years, Hebron has been a
site of tragic conflict, with Muslims killing
and expelling Jews (1929), and a Jew
massacring Muslims (Baruch Goldstein; 1994).
When we hear voices today say - it's our land,
by right (purchase) and divine decree - they
are basing the claim upon what we read in
Genesis.

Abraham remarried after Sarah's death,
a woman by the name of Keturah (Genesis 25:1),
together they had seven children. And then,
at 175 years of age, Abraham died in what
scripture calls: **"a good old age, an old man
and full of years."** Isaac and Ishmael came
together for the funeral; quite remarkable

really, for years before they were forced into separate ways; yet the boys came together and shared in the work of burying their father; they laid him to rest with Sarah (Genesis 25:10).

Isaac was the favored one foretold to Abraham and Sarah. Last week, we heard tell of Isaac's betrothal to Rebekah. It looked like the perfect match, with all the stars aligned for these two; but the appearance of bliss and marital harmony is deceiving.

They had trouble starting a family.

This morning, as we heard,
for all the play between

Isaac and Rebekah,
there was no pregnancy. Isaac, we read,
took to his knees, praying "**for his wife**"
that she might conceive (Genesis 25:21).

A pregnancy does come, but it comes
with complications.

There is worldly strife
and contention lodged
in Rebekah's womb,
and it puts her on edge.

She is informed that she carries twins,
and that they are destined to be great
competitors. When she delivers,
first **Esau**, then **Jacob**, it is clear,
they are as different as night and day.
Esau and Jacob, from the beginning
they sparred and wrestled, in the
cramped space of the womb; and later
in the world. Though they have the same
mother and same father, they
are quite unlike each other.

In two verses, we have grand summary

(Genesis 25:24-26). Esau was the hunter,
he read “Field and Stream,”
and frequented Cabela’s.

Jacob was quiet, the introvert, who
preferred the convenient kitchen
rather than rustic camp.

Isaac loved Esau;
Rebekah loved Jacob.
And those differing loves
defined a conflicted family life.

In particular – there is a shadow side
to Jacob. As described by W. Brueggemann:
Jacob “**is born to a kind of restlessness
so that he must always insist, grasp,
and exploit. His life is a trouble not only
to himself but for those around him**”
(*Genesis Commentary*, p. 214).

This assessment is captured in the
telling of Jacob purchasing Esau’s birthright.
Birthright – bear with me – birthright was
special status with privilege and honor
and rights.

The birthright – the first born male –
designated heir and concentrated
property and preserved wealth.
Birthright gave bragging rights –
of being first and favored.

I have a rank as a child in my family system
of nurture – I was a first son, but second child.
I have an older sister. Given there are only two of us,
there is always the sense of being second –
and in my instance, last.

Children naturally compete at some levels.

When you're the younger or youngest, you are often on the losing end, until you acquire the skill and confidence to hold your own.

I was reading this week - a social scientist and researcher by the name of Judy Dunn has done pioneering work in the study of siblings.

According to Dunn:

"... children are far more socially sophisticated than we ever imagined. That little 15-month-old or 17-month-old is watching like a hawk what goes on between her mother and older sibling. From 18 months on, siblings understand how to comfort, hurt, and exacerbate each other's pain. They understand family rules, can differentiate between transgressions of different sorts, and can anticipate the response of adults to their own and to other people's misdeeds.

But in this question of selling birthright, there is no scheduled auction for a reconsidered bid. Case gets closed with a final score, branded upon each: Jacob closes the deal and is winner; Esau gets to live his life with knowledge of having been bettered; he gets the loser tag.

This is what I want to focus upon just for a moment this morning. Our need to get beyond the notion that every encounter is competition, that every transaction has an outcome of winner and loser.

There is a temptation to say:
All is well that ends well.
Jacob and Esau eventually will work out their differences. That's a convenient way of avoiding what is obvious: we've got a broken

family, full of resentment, fear, and carrying a lifetime of bitterness staring us right in the face. God hasn't willed this, but God has to deal with it, to further the promise of blessing the families of earth.

- (1) As Christians, it is so important that we see God at work to revise the rank and file ways of the world, in ways that reverse what troubles come from birthright. We are not "fated to the way the world is presently organized" (Brueggemann, p. 215).

God topples the mighty, elevates the poor, that rich and poor together might honor their creator and maker.

God will humble Egypt to liberate Israel.

In the ministry of Jesus- heirs to the kingdom are identified as the meek, the hungry, the poor, the merciful, the pure in heart.

Our God shows no favor for the first, but wants to lay claim to all, first and last, with love that is sufficient for all.

This is what is really scandalous about this scripture. It is upsetting of order designed by the human constructs - favoring some at the expense of others. Jesus carried on this tradition, refusing to pick any side, other than the side of God, and God's broad reach into the lives of people languishing in the outer limits of concern. It's probably best illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son, which includes the father needing to plead with the oldest

child who is resentful and angry when
a brother, having been lost, is found.

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I do want us to see another element at work in this negotiation for birthright, for privilege and special favor. It is said that Esau was hungry. That Esau was famished.

Jacob dangles and entreats with stew to satisfy Esau's cravings. And Esau, gives little thought to the consequences of what he is forfeiting. He is impulsive, without discipline, subject to his stomach.

I want to be careful here. When you are hungry – you'll do just about anything to get what you want. Great hunger will inspire all kinds of commandment infractions.

Do you recall the line from G. B. Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, where Col. Pickering asks Alfred Doolittle (the father of Eliza), "**Have you no morals, man?**" Doolittle is quick to respond: "**Can't afford them, Governor. Neither could you if you was as poor as me.**"

We are living and ministering in an age with great divisions, are we not? How often we default – quick to assess we can't afford to change our ways. If the world is set up for winners and losers, that's just the way it'll have to be. It is a social Darwinian worldview that has seeped into much of cultural spirituality. Winners are blessed, and losers are left to suffer.

We need be careful of our hungers. We need be careful of seeking immediate satisfaction. There is

much in our tradition that counsels caution with regard to hunger, even that we deny ourselves on occasion, that we postpone immediate satisfaction, for good that comes from being patient and kind and dutiful. **“Wait on the Lord,”** the psalmist states. **Be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait on the Lord** (Psalm 27:14).

If we hunger, we best hunger for righteousness and peace, and trust always that God will satisfy.

A final thought. The scripture gives us a picture of a broken world. But it is not the only vision we would entertain today. Jesus calls us into a world of blessings that come by way of faith, hope, and love, to be shared with others, as God has shared with us.

If we are ever to move beyond the pastimes of winning and losing, we need reckon with radical sharing of our lives, with reaching out to others whatever the degree or depth of their peril.

A closing story that I heard about this week, which both surprised and inspired me. From Florida, Panama City Beach, the Gulfside, dangerous riptides got hold of a family; first some children who were trapped offshore, and then a mother and grandmother went after them, such that three generations of a family were caught in dangerous current. Together, they could only call for help.

Commotion on the beach caught the attention of Jessica Simmons, who thought there was a shark sighting. She then realize it was a life threatening drowning that could occur, and she quickly declared: **“These people are not drowning today. It’s not happening.”** That family will not die today under my watch. Ms. Simmons took action, summoned help, and others followed her lead. To get to the family in peril, 80 people linked arms, some of whom couldn’t even swim,

forming a human chain, reaching out – deep into the danger.
The 80 people didn't have much in common; they
were united only to help the drowning. And in so doing,
they saved lives. Not one was lost. Battered and bruised.
Yes. But no one died due to the help that showed up.

To move beyond the labels of winners and losers,
we need to link up. We need to link up to reach the floundering.
We need to link up to help those who require help.
We need to link up with those who are desperate for peace.
We need to link up with those who hungry ...
to reach any who haven't yet found their place
at the Table where Jesus can be found
providing what plenty we need to thrive.

Let us be just such a people. For our good.
For love of God, as blessing in the world.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*