

Why, I Oughtta...  
Genesis 26:34-27:4, Ephesians 6:1-4  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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Before we turn to the Old Testament reading for this morning, I have a news flash for you. This may be surprising to a few of you, but I'm going to throw it out there anyway: not everyone's family is as perfect as yours is. I know, I know, it's hard to imagine. You walk in here most Sundays and we're all so well-scrubbed and polite and our children all seem so brightly-futured, but the reality is that not all families are like yours. Can you accept that?

Good. This morning, the bulletin calls us to a reading that goes from Genesis 26:34 – 27:4, but I'm going to modify that slightly and read you a little more from the story of Isaac and Rebekah's family. Isaac, as you recall, is the son of Abraham and Sarah, and you might also remember that when he was about three, his mother and father kicked Isaac's half-brother and his mother out of the house and left them to die in the wilderness and Isaac himself was nearly done in by the old man a dozen or so years later. Maybe with those kinds of issues in his "family of origin", it's not surprising that Isaac and Rebekah's family puts the "fun" in "dysfunctional".

*We read in Genesis 25: 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... 24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb... 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

So the first thing we discover about this family is that mom and dad played favorites. Uh-oh. That's usually not good for business. And, it wasn't. Esau grew up thinking that as Dad's favorite, he could do whatever he wanted, and Jacob grew up learning how to play the angles and be a manipulator as he pitted his parents one against the other. Last week we read about a conflict between the boys, and today's reading shows us how things just continue to slide downhill:

*Genesis 26:34 When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; 35 and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.*

One little sentence tucked into the end of chapter 26, but what a powerful message it contains. When Esau was forty, his father was a hundred. And when Esau was forty, he married "the wrong" girl. Actually, the wrong girls. And that made life bitter for the family.

We don't know what kind of bitter it was. Since these women were Hittites, we can assume that they knew nothing of the covenant with Abraham and the call to be God's people. They were outside of, and maybe opposed to

the faith. Big deal? What did Esau care? He was dad's favorite. The strong one. You can hear him grunting, "Get over it, old man. Get with the times. Everyone's marrying the Hittites these days..."

But look what Isaac does in the face of this pain: he seeks to bless his son anyway.

*Genesis 27:1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." 2 He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. 3 Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. 4 Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die."*

Isaac realizes that he's not getting any younger and he wants to write out his will and take care of his affairs before he dies. And even though Esau and his wives have brought this old man nothing but bitterness, Isaac acts like a parent here. He wants to bless his boy.

Last week, we read about how Esau had already sold the blessing to Jacob in a time of famine, but it's clear that Esau's put that out of his mind, and clearly Isaac knows nothing about it. We'll spend some more time next week exploring how this happens, but for our purposes this morning, let's just note that in Genesis 27, Jacob schemes his way into forcing both Esau and Isaac to recognize that the rights of the first-born are his. Isaac and Esau figure this out and they are distraught – Genesis 27:38 records Esau breaking down and weeping for his father to make it all right.

And then, something very interesting happens. Isaac doesn't simply pretend that the blessing he gave to Jacob was irrelevant. Instead, he affirms the power of that blessing and tells his son Esau the truth. "There's nothing I can do about that, son. We have to figure out how to live with that." As distraught and dysfunctional as Isaac is, at least he tells his sons the truth and tries to help them shape their lives around the situation that is, rather than the one that they wish they had.

Esau doesn't quite get this, however, and begins to plot to kill his brother and take the blessing back. Rebekah gets wind of this and starts to pout in an attempt to manipulate Isaac into sending Jacob away for his own protection. The ploy works and Isaac calls for Jacob, sends him away, and Jacob obeys. Now, look what happens next:

*Genesis 28:6 Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women," 7 and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. 8 So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, 9 Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.*

Esau learned from where he was and he tried to make things between him and his parents better. Now, the strategy of simply marrying another wife when

your mom and dad don't like the two you already have is not one I'd recommend, but I want you to notice the point here: Esau, rather than being a source of bitterness to his parents, seeks to become instead a source of blessing. When we get to Genesis 32 and 33, you'll see the incredible reunion that occurs between Esau and Jacob some years down the pike, but let me just clue you in and tell you that it's among the most amazing stories of reconciliation that you'll see in scripture.

So, what do we learn from scripture this morning? First, kids can get on your nerves. Like I said, that probably doesn't happen in your family, but it's out there. And maybe you know how that is, too. When your six month old or six year old acts defiant or contrary, it's cute, or maybe a little irritating. When your sixteen year old resists your attempts to be a parent, it's incredibly frustrating. And when your adult child shuts you out, it's heartbreaking. Just heartbreaking. If you don't know it, praise the Lord. If you do know it, you can recognize it in Isaac and Rebekah's family. Kids get on your nerves, all right.

Another thing we learn from the Word of God this morning is that parents can really screw things up. From the time that they started playing favorites over the cradle until the day that they each lobbied for their "chosen" son to come out on top in the Blessings Sweepstakes, much of what Isaac and Rebekah do in this chapter is, to put it mildly, unfortunate. They take God's good gift of children and, through their children, act out their own insecurities and sinfulness. And in the process, they very nearly kill one of them. Yep, it's there in the Bible. Parents make mistakes.

And there's a third thing that we can't help but pull out of this soap opera – something for which everyone in this room ought to give thanks and rejoice. What's that? The good news that God doesn't seem to have a problem working in and through families that are not perfect. For crying out loud – look at Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob. Nobody's hands are clean here – they're all messed up. And yet God's promise holds fast. God meets each of these people, challenges them, and uses them to bring about his future. God moves even in dysfunctional families. Praise God for that!

So what are we supposed to do with this great knowledge that kids get on your nerves and parents make mistakes and God acts in spite of that?

I don't suppose for a second that Paul was thinking of this particular story when he wrote to his friends in Ephesus, but his words surely apply to this situation. In writing to a community that is in transition and learning to live as faithful followers of Jesus, he reminds children that their calling from God is to obey and honor their parents in the Lord. He's not suggesting here that these children are to be mindless drones who accept whatever their parents say, but he does seem to expect that they will treat their parents as worthy of some sort of respect.

I hope you notice, too, what Paul does NOT say – especially in light of the story we've had from Genesis. Paul does NOT say, "honor your parents...unless your dad drinks too much." He does NOT say, "honor your parents...unless your mother plays favorites." This is an imperative – we are to look at our parents and

seek to find some way in which treat them as worthy of some level of respect if for no other reason than they are creatures who are made in the image of God and through whom God chose, for his own reasons, to give us life.

Now be careful, because neither Paul nor Pastor Dave is saying that we are always supposed to do what our parents say. Parents, as we've seen, are just as sinful as the rest of us. For some people, being obedient to this command to honor our parents might mean putting some distance between us. If you have been abused by a parent, you are not bound to stick around so that it can happen again. If you have been manipulated by a parent, you might actually "honor" that parent by standing up to the manipulation and saying, "you know, Dad, I understand where you're going with this, but I think that you're wrong for these reasons..." Do you see what I mean? "Honor" does not mean always agreeing or acquiescing, but there is no cause for belittling your parents or undercutting their humanity.

And parents are called to bring up their children under the discipline and instruction of the Lord. A friend of mine is a psychiatrist who spends all day delving into the lives of broken and distorted people. The day after his son was born, he came to see me and said, "Dave, I'm not sure I'm up to this. Every day I see people who have been damaged by their fathers. And now, God is trusting me to raise a son who will not harm his children. This is the highest calling I have ever received..."

Paul was writing to his friends in the midst of a Roman culture which said that fathers had the absolute right of ownership over their children and wives. They had god-like authority and power, and everyone knew it. And Paul says, "Don't push that too far. Use caution. Be nurturing. Make sure your children know who the Lord is and what his call on their lives is all about."

Now here's the deal, beloved. Paul says that we are do these things when? Now. You are not exempted from this commandment if you've had a bad start. People in Ephesus who are getting this letter are just like us: some of us have known this our entire lives while others of us are hearing scripture for the first time. It doesn't matter. We are called, TODAY, to act with honor and respect towards our parents and in tenderness and truth-telling to our children.

You may be forty years old and today is the day when you have to think about what it means to honor and respect your parents. If you didn't do it yesterday, or if you were wounded by them thirty years ago - you are still called to treat them as the means by which God gave you life. It may be that you are sixty-five years old and you are, for the first time, thinking about how in the world you are going to offer discipline and instruction in the Lord to your adult children. If you were doing the math in Genesis, you'll have noticed that Isaac was well over a hundred when he blessed his sons. Time seems to be of secondary importance here.

Today, there is a word for anyone in the room who is a parent or a child of another human being: will you model grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope in your relationships with these others? Will you, so far as is possible, seek to follow Christ together, and to grow in your ability to be not only a parent or a

child, but a brother or a sister in the Lord to that person? God's blessing comes through families – flawed, sinful, broken – and redeemed families. May God bless your attempts to live faithfully in those relationships and may God bless us as we seek to be a family of faith in this place. Amen.