

Not Like The Other Kids  
Genesis 27:41-28:5  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
July 23, 2006  
Pastor Dave Carver

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Well, actually, I was really sure of what I wanted to do – I wanted to graduate, I wanted to finish school, I wanted to get out. But I didn't have enough credits. My friend Rob said, "Dave, just sign up for the Anthropology course. It's incredibly easy, and I hear that Arthurton never gives any homework. You get the credit AND you don't have to work.

Music to my ears...except I found myself doing homework. Not because the instructor assigned it, but because I found that I really liked the class. I had been running along seeking an easy out to a tough problem, and something better happened. I actually learned. Go figure. As I look back on that, I have a hunch that my actual graduation was probably never very much at risk – but having that incentive to take the class was a good, good thing.

The readings we've heard this morning are a little bit like my anthropology class – they give us two different views of the same event. In the first reading, we hear it from Jacob's current perspective: he's got to think fast, he's got to "get out of Dodge" because if he doesn't, his brother is going to kill him. And so in this passage, it looks as if he and his mother cook up a little cover story about needing to go find a wife somewhere else – as an excuse for him to save his scrawny little neck.

The second reading gives us Isaac's take on the affair, as the old man sends his son on a mission to find a wife and to preserve the promise. You'll remember that way back in Genesis 12, God made a promise to Abram to make him a great nation, to give him land, and to make him a blessing to the entire world. In chapter 28, Isaac reminds Jacob of that blessing and commissions him to avoid getting too familiar with the surrounding people, but instead to focus on the promise he's been given.

Did you ever read something in the scripture, look at it, and say, "Why did they bother putting this in here?" I mean, really...what's the point here. Think about the fact that Genesis was a collection of campfire stories – an oral tradition – for years and years and years before it was written down. Why in the world do you suppose that we are told about Jacob's flight from his brother and his search for a wife?

The obvious answer, of course, is that "it happened". Of course it happened. But there is a lot of stuff that happened back in the day that we don't know anything about. Isaac's whole life, for instance – I mean, we read about him getting born, about him nearly being done in by his old man, and about the blessing that was finagled out of him. There's not much there about Isaac – but here we have two views of a pretty insignificant chapter in Jacob's life. Why?

There are some folks who have said that this story is in the Bible as a warning about making sure that we stay racially or ethnically pure. You know,

they picture Isaac as saying, “Well, Heck, I don’t want to say anything bad about them Canaanites...Jeepers, some of my best friends are Canaanites. I just don’t want my son to be marryin’ one of ‘em, if you know what I mean...”

The problem with that is that there really isn’t that great of a racial or ethnic difference between Jacob and the other kids at the school. It’s about 500 miles to home, that’s all. And while you might have issues with your son marrying someone from, say, Cleveland or Baltimore, chances are that they’re not racially motivated – we’re about the same, aren’t we?

The people who told and re-told this part of the story of Jacob, the folks who held onto it the tightest, seem to have been a group of leaders who lived hundreds of years after Jacob died. When they heard this bit about Jacob’s running off to Paddan-aram, they understood it to be a warning against syncretism or assimilation.

Now there are two words you don’t hear every day. Syncretism means the attempted combination of different systems of religious belief or practice. If you were to say, “You know, I love the idea of Christmas, and I don’t want to forget all the truth that we can find in Purim, and I find that fasting in the month of Ramadan helps me to embrace the teachings of the Buddha...” that would be syncretism. Syncretism is when you take a little of this and a little of that and add in this other thing and make up your own story...

Assimilation is very similar to syncretism. Assimilation is when a smaller group of people is simply absorbed into a bigger group. For instance, when my great-great grandparents came to the US, they were a part of a Pennsylvania Dutch group. They had their own language, customs, and so on. My grandfather kept some of the language, but he changed the spelling of his name. My mother didn’t have a clue about language, knew something about the Pennsylvania Dutch, and told me stories. My closest connection to that culture at this point is that I like Shoo-Fly Pie. Our family has been assimilated into American culture.

Jacob, you see, is not like all the other kids at Canaanite P.S. #321. Sure, he looks like them, he talks like them, and he dresses like them. But he’s the one who has been given the promise that comes from God. He’s the one who has been chosen to carry the blessings of God into the next generation. Nobody else had the promise that had been given to Abram, passed along to Isaac, and then given to Jacob. He knew that he was to have descendants, land, and that in his family, the whole world would be blessed. And if he were to forget that, then the world itself would be poorer, because then no one would remember.

The main problem that faces God’s people – Abram’s descendants – in the Old Testament is that of idolatry. That is, they worship something or someone who is not God. They tended to leave the promises of God behind in their desire to live into the culture and get along with their neighbors. The people who came to value this story the most were the leaders of Israel who lived after the exile to Babylon – something that occurred hundreds of years after this fact. But in their day, they finally realized that THEY were the promise – that they were the people who God would use to change the world. They knew that they were blessed in order that they might be a blessing to the world. And if their children

went off and married non-faithful people in the same way that my grandfather married a non-Pennsylvania Dutchwoman, then before too long you'd have people who wouldn't know any more about being true to God's call on their lives than I know about driving a buggy or building a barn without power tools. "Mixed marriage" was a threat to the identity of the people and therefore a threat to the promise. Why? Because we are people and we rub off on each other.

Let's think about an experiment, OK? Let's say that we take ten of the young men who play Basketball at the Open Door on Thursday nights with Adam and ten young men from Sewickley Academy and put them on a desert island for three months. At the end of that time, are you going to find twenty young men who come off the boat saying, "Hello, sir! How are you this fine afternoon?" Not likely. There will be twenty men saying, "Yo....wassup?" and maybe giving the little one-arm fist-to-the-back greeting...twenty young men who have assimilated and syncretized and become one culture. Why? Because it's just so easy to do that. To be like the other.

The point of the passage before us this morning is a warning for God's people to maintain their identity – to remember who they are, and whose they are. A lot of what we do here each Sunday morning is deliberately a reminder to keep that identity. We baptize, and remember our baptisms. We act and re-enact the Lord's supper. We pray and sing and remind each other of who we are called to be. We do that...an hour a week.

What about the rest of the time? Who has your attention then? Who whispers into your heart at night? To whom do you listen when you're wondering what to do? What I want to know is, how do YOU remember that YOU are not like the other kids?

It would be easy to direct this message to the young people...to look at those of you who are about to begin in college or in a new career and say, "Listen to me: choose wisely! Pay Attention! Choose your friends carefully." And if I made this that kind of sermon, you'd thank me for it. You'd shake my hand and say, "Good sermon, Reverend. That's tellin' 'em."

But here's the thing about paying attention and about remembering our identity. We can't only do it once. What would my marriage be like if Sharon said, "Dave, you never pay attention to me" and I said, "I don't know why you say that. I paid attention to you on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1983. I'm hurt that you have forgotten."

This message about avoiding syncretism and resisting assimilation? About maintaining our identity as God's own children? It's for everyone, all the time. Who are you listening to? How are you staying pure in your faith?

One of my friends does this by not having a television. She said, "I like trashy tv way too much. So if I don't have a television, then I won't watch it. And I'll save \$400 per year on cable."

Another friend prays with a group of people every two weeks. Just a check-in, where people can be honest with each other and where he will be

asked some tough questions by men who really care for him and who are helping him to remember who he is.

Still others are struggling to make wise choices with their leisure time and spending money. How do the ways that we allocate our energy and our money reinforce who we want to be?

Some people have to actually leave in order to be true to the promise. Jacob did. I have a friend not who grew up around here, and then got really heavily into drugs – drugs that stole at least fifteen years of his life and landed him in jail. He's out, he's doing well...and he knows that if he comes back here the drugs will eat him alive...and so he stays away, learning a new life in a new place. There are people in this room who, if you want to be serious about following the promise of God, are going to have to end a relationship, make some new friends, or find a new job. For some of you, you can't hold on to where you are and still go to where God wants you to be. Following the promise can be a scary and risky thing to do.

In Jacob's day, it was easy to tell who could lead him to a blessing and who would lead him to trouble. Hundreds of years later, in the post-exilic times, it was a little tougher to do that. Today, in our culture, it's incredibly hard. Here we are, living in a place that calls itself "the melting pot". Our culture says that truth is relative and that religion is private. You can have your truth and I'll have my truth; we live in fear of offending our neighbor; we would rather be polite than obedient.

I'm NOT saying that we are called to become boors or jerks or reactionaries. I am saying that we need to be vigilant to make sure that we are always growing in our ability to live out the promise; that we are always seeking to be God's blessing in the lives of those who are around us. You are called to be a blessing – blessed to be a blessing. Don't settle for anything less – you are not like the other kids. Amen.