

Message – July 9-10, 2011
Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Obligation

This has been a big week in our family. Our daughter, Emily, and her husband, Steve, are celebrating the birth of the newest member of their household, Charlie. Charlie is rivaled by his twin sister and brother, three and one half year old, Dale and Cary. There's plenty of confusion and disruption and new understanding of family obligation. At the same time, all is well and there's much joy and excitement.

So, today, I'd like to talk with you a little bit about family, our households, our faithful communities, those people we love; those people God places on our hearts; who demand the most of us, expect the best of us and obligate us to our greatest responsibilities. I'd like to talk with you about family in the bible and how God chooses to move around in bible families.

The word family is defined with complicated depth and heritage. Beginning at creation, stretching throughout the book of Genesis and beyond, family is revealed as something out of a classic dysfunctional family systems model: uncomfortable, uneasy stuff, including damaged marriages, difficult children, emotional triangles, selfish choices, miraculously balanced with lots of nurturing, encouragement, success, achievement and healing love. Of course, in the middle of it all, God chooses to enter, fully immersing God's self, in the best of times and in the worst of times, planting blessing upon blessing, fulfilling God's covenant promise of ever present love and grace.

Family is associate in the Hebrew text with, descendants, or generations. When we speak of family in scripture, we're not talking so much about our immediate family unit. We're talking about our heritage, our roots, sowed from the dawn of creation where God gives birth to the heavens and the earth; and where God's tender touch nurtures creation through the stars and the skies, the plants and seas, and then, where God's great likeness is born into humankind through the descendants of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, on into the great family patriarch, Abraham.

And, while we'll learn much about unattractive family dynamics in the Hebrew text, and how dysfunctional family can be, we learn first and foremost that God's creation is good; that from, generation to generation, from God's creation of the heavens and the earth, God's protective, loving covenant promise is with us always and we are not just called, but obligated, blessed to be a blessing.

In today's reading from Genesis, the birth of Jacob and Esau brings forth the third generation of Abraham's family, the patriarch of all Israel, the forefather of all God's people. God expects a lot from Abraham in living out his family obligation. Abraham is many things as a patriarch. He's faithful, generous, deceitful and doubtful, prayerful and presumptuous, diplomatic, demanding and trusting...

And, one thing for certain, he's obedient. God says go, and Abraham goes. He uproots his family, packing them up, they move around to the other side of the fertile crescent, near the land of Canaan,

and in the time of famine, onto Egypt, trusting that God will provide fruitful means for him to care for his family.

Now, often it is in family dynamics, when a conflict or challenge arises, we begin to problem solve. We want all the questions answered and everything in order. In these last weeks of Emily's pregnancy, our whole family kept asking, when do we come, what do you need, where should we be? We wanted to make plans. That didn't help. The questions weren't ready to be answered. Instead, we just needed to trust and rest in the unknown and that the Lord was working in our family. So it is with Abraham. He's 75 when God calls him to leave his country to be the father of a great nation. And, he's in his nineties when God forms the covenant agreement promising that he will be the father of a nation as large as the many grains of sand along the shores and as many stars as are in the sky. And, he's 100 years old when his son Isaac is born! There's lots of waiting, much unknown and glorious discoveries of God working in God's time, not our time.

In the meantime, the family dysfunction blossoms. Abraham is deceitful about Sarah when they arrive in Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan. When it's time to return, there's not enough room in the larger family for two, affluent, strong willed, determined males. Greed gets the better of them. After some words, Abraham and his nephew, Lot, part company; Lot settling in Sodom and Abraham in Negeb. But, God still promises and blesses them both in abundance.

Things continue to get messy. Abraham laughs when God promises that he'll be the father of a great nation. You see, Abraham and Sarah don't have children. No heirs. Not a problem. Hagar, Sarah's maid, she'll be a surrogate. Well, it seems like a good idea at the time, but, Hagar, now the mother of Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, is beginning to outrank Sarah. Sarah is jealous and testy and treats Hagar horribly.

God continues to enter in spite of all the muck, and makes good his promise. Sarah gives birth to Isaac. But, again, not without trial. Abraham is put to the test as he is asked to present his beloved Isaac as a living sacrifice. God's trust in Abraham is confirmed as Abraham obeys and God, again, rescues.

The family grows and grows. Abraham's brothers all produce heirs and in the end Abraham, fathers eight sons. But, not all is as it seems. Seven of the sons are disinherited.

Sarah dies at the ripe old age of 127. Abraham and Isaac are devastated and mourn. Again, God intervenes, and blesses Abraham's son, Isaac with a wife, Rebekah, the daughter of Abraham's nephew, Bethuel. Struggle continues.

Isaac and Rebekah's story is reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah. In twenty years of marriage, Isaac and Rebekah fail to produce the obligated heir. Isaac prays. Let's face it, we just don't expect blessings to come out of infertility. In fact, for Isaac and Rebekah, just like Abraham and Sarah, infertility denotes the absence of God's presence. God hears our prayers. Rebekah conceives. The family saga continues. It's a difficult pregnancy. Rebekah carries twins and they struggle in her womb. In fact, the Hebrew text tells us the twins oppressively crush one another *and crush* Rebekeh while in the womb. Now Rebekah prays too. But, her prayer is different. She prays for relief from the crushing conflict being born into her womb.

This just might be the very first teaching on genetic mapping in human history. God sets the sibling rivalry course for us in Cain's animosity toward Abel. But, with Jacob and Esau, human conflict begins at inception. God says, Jacob and Esau are destined to be divided, separate from one another, even hostile. It's in their DNA. And God uses the make up to create in Jacob and Esau the greatness of two nations.

Earlier you heard me announce the joy of Emily and Steve's little Charlie being born. Before there was Charlie, there was Cary and Dale, Emily and Steve's twins, as I've also mentioned. Emily does pregnancy better than anyone I know. She's great at it. And, while she was pregnant with Cary and Dale, she just sailed through; no struggling and crushing in the womb. But, my guess is, it's unlikely God's intent is for them each to become the Matriarch and Patriarch of two divided, great nations, such as Israel and Edom as is intended for Jacob and Esau.

One shall be stronger than the other, God says, leading a nation of strong people who prevail because they rely on the Lord (2 Chr. 13:18). The other, less significant, shall serve, worshiping, in obedient service to God.

Strength is shown in Esau, who, ruddy red from the push, wins the race to be born first. Not without struggle, clutching Esau's heel, Jacob, whose name means, "heel grabber", is born second. God offers further claim on Jacob whose name also means, "May God Supplant" and "May God Protect". God has great plans for Jacob. In the end God renames Jacob, Israel, blessing him in the covenant promise that he father the twelve tribes of Israel.

Sibling rivalry is reinforced and fraught from the beginning. The brothers have little in common. Esau is an outdoorsman, hunting, laboring in the field. Jacob prefers the quiet close to home, in the kitchen, happily working with the women around the stove. And, to make matters worse, Isaac and Rebekah show favoritism.

Isaac favors Esau and Rebekah loves Jacob. *Not a good formula for peaceful family dynamics.*

Let me ask you a question? By a show of hands, how many of you here are the oldest among your siblings? Keep your hand up if you are the oldest male among your siblings. You are the primogeniture (prim-o-gen-i-ture), the firstborn. Like Esau, in biblical times, you own some significant responsibility a certain obligation.

First, as the oldest, you are entitled to a double portion of the family estate; that includes financial wealth and real estate holdings. That means, your brothers and sisters are receiving half of the family inheritance.

Second, you have some say, some authority over your siblings. That might sound pretty good, because you are the boss of them. But, it also means you are responsible for *the welfare* of your younger brothers and sisters. You need to provide for your brothers if they're unable to provide for themselves. You need to get those sisters married so they can be someone else's responsibility. And, son, sadly..., should your mother become widowed, she is your obligation.

Third, as the firstborn, ancient custom tells us your birthright grants you more than just a blessing from God; you share a close and favored relationship with God. This relationship is a gift, the blessing of life, given from God, where we're called to honor our family heritage, and where we're called to use our gifts serving God with all that we are and all that we have.

Finally, don't get your hopes up too high. It seems even in scripture birth order privileges can be rescinded. Younger siblings, there's hope for you. Should he choose to do so, your father can divert the birthright of the oldest to a younger family member simply out of favoritism.

Much further along in the story, aged Jacob, now a father himself, on his deathbed, diverts the birthright of his oldest son, to Joseph, his youngest son, his favorite (Genesis 48:22). But, that's another story for another time in this family saga.

As you can well imagine, these family dynamics present some serious responsibilities and significant tension. Maybe this is why Esau is so quick to unload his family obligation. He's simply not up to the responsibility. Or, maybe he knows that having won the favoritism of his father, he doesn't need to worry about honoring the responsibilities of the firstborn. But, we'll learn later, that favoritism can be swayed as Jacob and Rebekah trick aged Isaac into blessing Jacob as primogeniture.

Maybe Esau felt all along that his father loved him for the wrong reasons. After all, what made Isaac proud about Esau was his accomplishments out in field; his outward signs of success. We hear little from Isaac about his love for Esau because of what's on his heart or soul; where his passions and delights lie.

One way or the other, Esau fails to live up to his family obligation. Caught up in the moment, overcome by an empty stomach and the sweet, temptation of a hearty meal, Esau bargains away the opportunity of a lifetime and sells his birthright to Jacob.

This family saga makes for great story telling. But, *it's not the family value story we want to hear.*

The story does call upon us to ask ourselves some challenging questions about how we honor God's blessings upon us. How many times have we neglected what is really important only to be lured into what is enticing in the moment? How often do we pick the easier road, rather than honor our God given obligations?

Whatever we call family, God is asking us to fulfill our obligations. Tomorrow, our Haiti team is shipping off to Mission. Christ Church will host Vacation Bible School for some 300 plus children. Next week we'll invite our CARITAS guests into our family of Christ Church; and the High Schoolers will be off to West Virginia on mission. For some, perhaps all, this is family: those communities where God blesses and keeps; where we discover much about ourselves and of what God is asking.

The grace is that God isn't keeping score, isn't putting us in order of significance. With God, in Christ, we are all favored, all blessed, all filled with God's covenant promise of hope; made known to us in Jesus Christ who comes to us as the lowliest, the most humble servant, obedient, all the way

to the cross, emerging from the tomb redeeming us with his honor and goodness. God obligates with encouraging, hopeful words: I love you, keep at it, work in the conflict, find solutions, be united in our diversity, celebrate love, and forgiveness. Here it is, my friends, and when we stumble and fall, God is with us, always in the promise, of healing, reconciling, and loving, and willing to rework the covenant agreement.

Early yesterday morning, our son in law, Steve gathered up Cary and Dale, buckled them into their booster seats in the back seat of the car. Making every effort to adjust to their new roles, situating their carseats to make plenty of room for newborn Charlie, off they went to the hospital where they collected Emily and baby Charlie. They're home now, and I'm off to be with them for the week. The family dynamics have shifted considerably. New obligations and responsibilities await them. They still have lots to learn about how to be this bigger, more demanding, sleep deprived, over active family.

Having held down the fort these last 4-5 days, Steve has a whole new appreciation for Emily's role at home. Emily is grateful that God has equipped her with a strong, healthy body to help in her recuperation from surgery. Cary and Dale aren't worrying too much about who is the firstborn. More so, they're ready to meet their obligations; ready to step up to the plate of being a big brother and a big sister, helping mommy and daddy create the best home possible for little Charlie.

Scripture tells us a lot about what family is not. Family is not bliss; in not ideal. You know the saying. We pick our friends. We don't pick our family. Family is messy, full of conflict, doubt, and despair. Family is also how in all the dysfunction, God's love still springs forth, grace grows, and forgiveness flourishes. God's favor is planted deep within us while still in the womb, as the fabric of our being, the rich soil of our very ability to seek understanding and resolution.

Next week, we'll continue the family saga, and learn more about Jacob and his family obligations; how history repeats itself, and how God continues to bless and keep. Read ahead, if you like, into Genesis through chapter 36. And, consider this challenge: God places value on our community as family, whatever its shape or size or situation and obligates us to honor our family. What steps do we need to take to honor God blessings upon us and our families?

Go with God, my greater family of Christ Church: trust and believe in God's promises for us; God's obligation to us – to be our God – loving, empowering, encouraging us, to be God's holy people cultivating a path of God's rich soil, flourishing in God's love and mercy.