

The Cost of Getting Ahead
Anything but Ordinary Sermon Series
Genesis 25:19-34
By Rev. Ridgley Beckett

This Sunday brings about the end of a HOT week. A week where we have all felt like we are living in a real live pressure cooker. Patience is thin, we're uncomfortable, and we're running for the shade or the air conditioning every time we get a chance. When we finally get respite from the heat we remember just how tired we are trying to survive out here. It is HOT.

This Wednesday Andrew and I were lucky? Enough to get tickets to the Phillies/Pirates game. In 100 degrees. At 9:00pm. We were all out there suffering together. One thing I really love about Philly fans is their relentless allegiance to their teams, even though when stuff goes awry, they're the first to let the players know what's up. In our seats, there were at least 5 Pirates fans within a 10-seat radius of me. Every time it was quiet there would be a VERY loud fan clapping at the wrong time, which would then create a ricochet of people loudly BOO-ing said fan from the "other side."

Now the game was happening at the same time the USA game was happening for the World Cup in San Francisco. Here I had assumed watching baseball should be the most American thing I should be doing 4th of July week, but that night we had greater allegiances than just our individual teams. Andrew and I took a walk in the concourse to see some folks and while we were chatting, I discovered that there were fans streaming the soccer game while at the Phillies game. And, while the Pirates rightfully deserved their "boo's" it was an interesting sight to see when both would start chanting USA USA together after the final goal was scored and the USA made it to the next round. It seemed like even though we were all in that ballpark rooting for different teams, we were united in one big family.

This fourth of July brings an intersection of a lot of things for us this year. It has been 250 years since our nation's founding. The world cup is bringing visitors from everywhere to enjoy our beloved nation of free refill cokes, deep fried chicken, and hot now Krispy Kreme donuts while enjoying national parks and cities. The content online that people are capturing has been redeeming for me: in a world full of what I thought was division, somehow, we found the space to set aside what makes us different and celebrate our differences together over a soccer game. I give you 10 minutes in Fairmount Park this month during a game, and you may find the same.

Our summer sermon series this year is called "Anything but Ordinary" –we are following the Old Testament scriptures through our liturgical calendar's "Ordinary time" and discovering that these texts...are anything but ordinary. We are following the founding family through Genesis, meeting Abraham and Sarah, Issac, and Rebekah—and the children—Ishmael and Issac, Jacob, and Esau. These families introduce what we later see as a variety of

cultures, nations, and even religions, that even while they are quite different, find their roots in the same family.

The first couple of weeks of our sermon series followed Abraham and his call to leave his home, to start his family later in life and his two sons Ishmael and Isaac. This morning, we picked up at the *end* of Abraham and Sarah's life. Ishmael and Isaac go their separate ways, Rebecca marries Isaac, and we begin to see the next generation of Abraham's blessing take shape. Rebecca becomes pregnant with twins, who scripture tells us are at odds even in the womb.

The Lord tells her in verse 23 that "there are two nations in your womb, two different people will emerge from your body, one people will be stronger than the other, the older will serve the younger"

Even at their birth, there are signs that the two will not get along. Jacob comes out clutching Esau's heel. In Hebrew, the name "Jacob" means "he will take away," and it sounds like the word for "heel."¹ As they grew up their differences grew greater- Esau was an avid outdoorsman, who loved to hunt, and Jacob was a quiet homebody. To make matters more complicated, scripture tells us that the parents of the boys played favorites: Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Isaac.

I cannot help but think about how much job security Isaac's family therapist would have. We are given two instances in the book of Genesis where Jacob tricks Esau out of his blessing and inheritance, the second Rebekah helping Jacob fool Isaac and take away Esau's blessing. This morning, we read about the first- an encounter these two very different brothers had one day.

Esau, who has just come in from hunting, is famished and asks his brother for something simple- food to eat. He asked for help, invited the opportunity for hospitality. Jacob could have been like his grandfather Abraham exercising hospitality as if God were in his midst. Instead, Jacob asks "What's in it for me?" He uses this as an opportunity to exploit his brother- to use his brother's weak and vulnerable position to get something for himself.

Who here has ever had family drama? We should all be raising our hands. We may have never been in a birthright duel over Lentil stew, but we can all identify how Esau or Jacob must be feeling in this moment.

If this passage and the others teach us anything, it is that families are not perfect. Family drama is not just a personal, private thing — it is systemic. Genesis 25 shows us an ancient

¹<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-genesis-2519-34-7>

family caught in exactly the kind of interconnected, reactive patterns groups of people can find themselves in.

Back in 2021, I completed interim ministry training, and a substantial chunk of that training was focusing on something called family systems theory.

Family Systems Theory is a psychological framework that views a family as an interconnected emotional unit rather than a collection of separate individuals. It posits that a change, conflict, or stressor affecting one member will trigger predictable, reciprocal reactions and behavioral patterns throughout the entire system- the theory shifts the focus away from blaming a single "identified person" and instead examines the dynamics of the whole group.

The reasons why we study family systems theory as pastors is that while our own individual experiences in our own families are personal to us, family systems show up in so many parts of our lives—in our congregations, in our workplaces, in our lives as Americans. And how we show up in our own families has a correlation to how we relate to people, especially groups of people.

Let me tell you when I first read this text and I was MAD at Jacob for being so manipulative. I was MAD that Jacob is so focused on what his *brother has* that he is willing to sacrifice important relationships and treat his family to an end. I was MAD at Jacob, because of my own stuff. I want fairness and helping the vulnerable and Jacob, who fathers the literal twelve tribes of Israel, did so on the feet of trickery and manipulation of the vulnerable.

But then I took a deep breath. Took a step back from this text however many things it can draw us in with personally and look to what God told Rebekah—

There are two nations in your womb, two very different people—and they will emerge at odds with one another in a power struggle.

Some Biblical scholars point to Esau's descendants as the Edomites and Jacobs descendants as the Israelites, signaling something bigger than just a sibling rivalry or being different from your brother. Some Biblical scholars will point to the fact that Jacob *had* to be a trickster to bring about the kingdom of Israel and God's blessing belongs to him. There are a variety of ways to interpret this text rife with complexity.

When I took a step back from my own emotional investment in the family dynamics, I noticed something the Holy Spirit was illuminating for us this day: Sometimes we can get so focused on bringing about a world that *we want* that we don't even realize that we are sacrificing the most important thing along the way: relationships, human dignity, respect. Each one of us in this room has an idea of what *we think* the work looks like to bring about the kingdom of God and how. And sometimes, like Jacob, we can be so sure that our endpoint is the right way, that we forget who we step on to get there.

Coming on the heels of last week's sermon from Massanetta I am reminded of Paul's words to the Romans, pursuing peace in a way that leads to mutual upbuilding. In a way that brings about the building up of the entire community, not just one getting their way.

The past two weeks the PCUSA has been gathering for their General Assembly in Milwaukee to vote on myriad changes to our constitution, how we do life together, and many other things. For many, General Assembly is a bit of a family reunion of sorts, bringing the people we love and the people we struggle to love in one room and trying to see the face of Christ in one another.

Our theologies differ, our worldviews differ, our politics differ, the families we grew up in are different. Even how we understand God is at odds sometimes. But if Genesis teaches us anything about families, it is that being connected to one another is messy work. Living as a nation full of different people is messy work. Sitting in Citizens Bank Park with a Pirates fan is messy work.

But we must never, ever, be so focused on our way, our agenda, our understanding that we forget the humanity of the other person in the room.

Somehow God works through Jacob again and again, lie after lie, trickery after trickery, God redeems even Jacob. God redeems even Isaac and Rebekah for playing favorites, God redeems even Esau who made a mistake in a moment of weakness. God works through our brokenness, and scripture reminds us that our work is mutual upbuilding, understanding, protection of the vulnerable and tolerance of those we feel most like being at odds with.

And it is our God, who brings nations, families, and people at odds with one another to one reconciling table, inviting us to see the humanity of one another despite our differences. To see that we are all in need of God's grace. To partake and be reminded that we are enough, and to go forth with the courage to do the challenging work of peace, love, inclusion, and tolerance. If a soccer game can give this divided world a taste of unity, then this table surely can bring about that and so much more.