

Worship in the Park
Genesis 25: Jacob and Esau

Jacob – the patriarch we love to, if not hate, then at least mock. He’s the bad boy of Abraham’s clan, the Russell Crowe of the Old Testament; a man born to brawl and stir up trouble wherever he goes. He’s been called a cheat, a liar, a scoundrel. And he’s made wonderful fodder for sermons over the years.

But as I re-read the story this summer, it occurred to me for the first time that the whole family is a little off. None of them is quite right.

Esau, well, Esau can probably be forgiven for whatever baggage he carried through life. It’s hard to imagine that you can come to the realization that your dad plans to sacrifice you and walk away unscathed by that. Esau probably had a bit of a nervous twitch from that moment on, and surely had some significant trust issues. Still, as a parent, it’s hard for me to find it excusable that Isaac had a favorite among his sons, and even more so that it was apparently a well-known fact that he had a favorite. Parents aren’t supposed to do that. And I don’t know what to make of the fact that the reason he loved Esau more was because he was fond of meat. That just seems pretty self-serving and kind of weird.

And Rebekah, well you would think that she would hold a grudge against both those boys after they tried to tear her apart while she was still pregnant with them, but she had her favorite, too, Jacob – the one who was causing all that trouble in there to begin with. They say that everyone loves an underdog, but the truth is that most people would really rather root for the winner, and God had let her know from the get-go that Jacob, the younger twin, would be the winner. The writer of Genesis doesn’t actually come out and say that was why he was Rebekah’s favorite, but it’s certainly implied. Given all the other things that were said about him that seemed to be about the only thing he had going for him.

And then there’s Esau. For twenty years I’ve been preaching “poor Esau” sermons when I get to these stories in the lectionary, but you know what? He’s not a total victim. Esau brought at least some of this on himself. I’m sure he was hungry after a long day out in the field, but was he really that hungry? He’s a bit of a drama queen, and seems to have some delayed gratification issues. I’m gonna die if I don’t get some of that stew and get it right now! What good is my vast inheritance to me if I die of hunger right here?? I’m not excusing Jacob for being a cheat and a scoundrel, but Esau sure made it easy for him. Like taking candy from a baby.

None of them was what we might call “A-list” people. True, we’re not talking mob-boss John Gotti here, but we aren’t talking Mother Theresa, either. No one in their right mind would have voted them the family most likely to become the patriarchs of a nation, God’s chosen people. The newly wedded Duke and Duchess of Cambridge wouldn’t have stopped by to rub shoulders with them on a state visit. It is doubtful that any of them were ever nominated for an award in their congregations’ men’s or women’s groups.

They were all just a little off. Just like you and I are all a little off. Or as Paul might have put it in a slightly more diplomatic way, they, we, are clay jars – people who limp, and tend to be drama queens, and carry baggage from a traumatic event when they were kids. People who favor one child over another even though they know it's wrong, or struggle with depression or have a bit of a temper. People who are timid or poor or remarkably untalented, or just unremarkable. Plain old, breakable, everyday people, with faults and flaws and limitations. People who, frankly, make the most interesting characters in a story, but are never going to change the world.

And that's okay, because this isn't their story, anyway. That's always the danger when you read the Bible to think you are reading stories about goofballs like Jacob or Peter, or being inspired by heroes like Moses or David or Paul, and the brave and awesome and faithful things they did. But you aren't reading their stories, you are reading God's story. These aren't stories about us, and what we are or aren't capable of, or how wise and gifted we are and the awesome things we did. They aren't even particularly intended to be stories about how God changes us from goofballs to heroes, or at least saints.

They are first, and last, stories about how God is at work bringing about the redemption of the world. They are stories about how God is bringing about peace and wholeness and healing and abundance in a world that seems hell-bent on self-destruction. That's the real story – despite how it looks, despite the wars and terrorism and frightening economic picture, and despite the fact that people starve to death every day and children are strapping on weapons and going to war, God's plan to redeem the whole world will win out. Not by magic. Not by miracles. And most certainly not by perfect people. God's most amazing work is being done by people who are all a little off. Ill-equipped, neurotic, self-centered, scared, incompetent, God takes them all, takes us all, and makes tools out of us in the most surprising ways.

Why us? First of all, we're about all God's got, right? Those perfect people out there are hard to come by. But the real reason, I think, is because we can't claim credit for any of it. We can't point at a church that grows and take credit for it, because it has grown despite our inept leadership and our clumsy efforts at being the body of Christ. We can't claim much credit for feeding the hungry and housing the homeless when we still gorge ourselves and fill huge houses with more stuff than we could possibly need. What has happened has been only because of the power of the Holy Spirit, working through us, and despite us. We can claim none of the glory – it all goes to God.

That's the take home point here: if the kingdom of heaven is winning out – and it is – and it's being done through people like us, clay vessels, people who are all just a little bit off, then it is all to the glory of God. We didn't do it, God did it. There's no way we can take credit for it if we have a shred of decency and honesty about ourselves, even if you are more saint than goofball at this point in your journey. Praise be to God, and only God, for the amazing and wondrous things he has done, for the salvation and redemption he is bringing about.