

What IS That?

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

July 16, 2017

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Genesis 25.19-34;
Psalm 119.105-112;
Romans 8.1-11;
Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

You know that experience of watching something unfold before your eyes that is so clearly dysfunctional in your mind but is being treated as perfectly normal by the people involved; and you look around shaking your head saying to yourself “What **IS** that?” “Who **DOES** that?” I have that experience with some regularity watching the news of late and almost always when catching a snippet of reality TV. It’s also interesting to note how easy it is to sniff out dysfunction in other people’s families or relationships and be rather blind to the less than healthy dynamics within our own.

All of this came to mind this week when reading this passage from Genesis 25 and the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is at home cooking a stew when his brother came in from the field famished. In an exchange that should have been as simple as one brother saying to the other “Hey, you must be hungry after a long day in the field, would you like something to eat?” becomes instead this high stakes negotiation for a birthright. All that was exchanged here was measly bowl of soup. If Jacob was so concerned about the fairness of the exchange he could have asked Esau to relinquish the game from his next hunting trip. But instead when Jacob senses the intensity of Esau’s hunger he sees an opportunity to leverage his brother weakness for his own personal gain. Jacob doesn’t miss a beat before making this outrageous demand that Esau first sell him his birthright. He has clearly been scheming for this moment looking for just this opportunity. He steals his brother’s birthright for a bowl of soup. What IS that? Who DOES that?

Which brings me back to that earlier observation of how easy it is to sit in judgment of someone else's desperate actions and tell ourselves we would never do such a despicable thing. Really? Never? A friend on face book this week was posting about a terrible moment in history in the city where she lives where a blackout in the middle of hot summer night led to looting and destruction. She wrote something I really appreciated: "And as someone whose air conditioning only started working a few days ago and who has windows that only open two inches, I connected with a desire to loot the hotel that put in this HVAC system so poorly. Not that I would do it, but I can understand the impulse. It's an impulse we all can have, especially those of us who would think we would never do such a thing. We are all capable of such things under certain circumstances."

As you look at the circumstances around this story of Esau and Jacob you begin to see exactly how this scandalous moment between brothers could occur. First of all there is the whole system of birthrights. You may not come from a family with a big estate to be divided – that's certainly not my world either. But even if you do chances are the inheritance will be divided equally between all of the children of the family. Not so in the patriarchal world of Jacob and Esau. The eldest son gets more and not just a little more, he inherits a double portion over his younger brothers. And yes I said brothers; daughters don't even figure into this equation.

Talk about a set up for sibling rivalry. That's to say nothing of that insidious sentence found in vs. 28 "Isaac loved Esau...but Rebekah loved Jacob." From the very beginning these two have been pitted against each other. The favoritism in their family wasn't a sneaking suspicion it was so blatant it could be stated as plain as day. We know the kind of dynamics that stem from jealousy and rivalry. We know that early experiences of rejection if unresolved can create a lifetime of struggle and conflict. The more I sat with this story the more human and universal it became.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on the book of Genesis reminds the reader that the stories of Jacob circulated among the northern tribes of Israel. Not in the south where Jerusalem would eventually become the center and seat of religious and political power. The south maintained the stories of Abraham and the chief concern in the Abraham story according

to Brueggemann was a vertical concern about how the promise of God to make of him a mighty nation would transfer from generation to generation.¹ The north which never settled into the same kind of centralized system of power circulated these stories of Jacob which take into account the horizontal dimensions across a generation where different positions and privileges play out in the dynamics of human relationships leading Brueggemann to claim “The narrative about Jacob portrays Israel in its earthiest and most scandalous appearance in Genesis...”²

And I say – thank God! Thank God for earthy and scandalous stories because that is the life that we all live when we are willing to tell the truth about it. There actually is an answer to the rhetorical question of “What IS that?” The answer is “This is US!” This....is...us.

I had a wonderful experience walking with a friend yesterday morning. It was one of those soulful conversations that was both broad in that we talked about everything from national politics and denominational dynamics to personal relationships but it was also a deep conversation. Where we wrestled with some intellectual questions about how the work of social justice and equity sometimes feels at odds with our commitments to restorative practices and nonviolent communication. And how wrestling with all of these tensions in community can begin to trigger some of the painful pieces of our own personal histories. And our conclusion to this summit to solve all the world’s problems – was “we are living in one big hot mess!”

But thank God we do not wrestle alone. The witness of this earthy and scandalous cycle of stories is that God is in the middle of this colossal mess. Brueggemann used slightly different words when he wrote: “...the narrator (of the Jacob stories) knows that the purposes of God are tangled in the web of self-interest and self-seeking.”³

I want to be clear about this: I don’t mean to say that God is pulling strings such that the selfish and destructive things I do can be excused because

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 206.

² Ibid, 204.

³ Ibid, 204.

God intends them for good as if the consequences of that selfishness and destruction don't matter. Jacob will eventually run for his life out of fear for the duplicitous ways he has treated his brother. What we do and how we do it - it all matters.

However, there is more going on than we can see in the moment. God's capacity to take whatever it is that is before us and help us to transform and heal and restore whatever is broken is truly mind boggling. Even though the way that Jacob goes about all this is twisted and wrong and scandalous and will have a lifetime of wrestling with God and with his brother to make things right again - God is working something out here. Paul will look back from the book of Romans and see in this story an example of the teaching of Jesus that "the last shall become first" and the teaching of Moses that "God will have mercy on those on whom God will have mercy"⁴. God will not be bound by systems and structures of power and privilege. Clearly the work of upending those systems is messy and complicated and it is inevitable that our personal histories of pain get tangled up in it all.

So what do we do? We keep coming back to God's word and we keep doing this work in community. We keep praying for some light to fall on the path. We keep praying for the word to fall in fertile soil. We keep coming to the table of our Lord to be fed for this journey and to remember that this table is set before us AND our perceived enemies. It is a table that is so broad and so wide it is set before the whole, big, hot mess that is our together in this world.

Thanks be to God!

⁴ Ibid, 220.