

Covenant Word

God's Favorite

Genesis 25:19-34; I Peter 2:9-10; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

correctly, Rebekah's barrenness and the sense of failure that accompanied it, has been evident for 20 years, and yet God remembers Rebekah because of Isaac's prayers.

The pregnancy is troubled. The children toss and tumble so violently, while still in the womb, that mother Rebekah wants to die. Assured by the Lord that her discomfort will be worth it, she endures until the twin boys are born. Esau is delivered, and coming right behind, clinging to his brother's heel, is Jacob.

They are different from the very beginning. Physically, Esau is red and hairy. Jacob is smooth skinned. Esau is an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter who spends his days in the woods. Jacob is quiet, a thinker, who stays inside reading and helping in the kitchen. So from the beginning, each finds favor in a different parent's eye. Father Isaac loves Esau. Mother Rebekah loves Jacob. Both are consumed with making sure their favorite receives what is rightfully, and not so rightfully, theirs. They are a family that thrives on

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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It did not take me long to figure it out. You see, it was right there on the wall. In my family, we call these "Walls of Fame." You've seen them too. Maybe you have one in your home. My in-laws' "Wall of Fame" was the long wall that led from the living areas of the house all the way to the most remote bedroom. Lined up symmetrically to display memorable moments were photographs of Diane: Diane in dance recitals, Diane in

the high school band, Diane as a flag corps member of the Million Dollar Band. Next came Debra: Debra as a cheerleader; Debra being sworn in as an officer of the Student Government Association; Debra a be-ribboned all-county swimmer. Then there was Lloyd: Lloyd as an all-star champion; Lloyd as Lonesome Polecat in the high school musical production of "Little Abner;" Lloyd as the first Shelton

male to graduate from college. All in all, it was lovely to take it in, but there was an undeniable message available to those who had ears to hear. You see, the girls' pictures were 5x7's all symmetrically hung. But when you got to Lloyd's, the only son of an only son, his portrait was a 12x18! It was larger than life, literally. All that was missing was a plague underneath that read, "The Son!"

Now I suspect that in the tents of Isaac, we would find a 12x18 portrait of Esau, and in the tents of Rebekah, there would be a 12x18 portrait of Jacob. This parental favoritism set the boys up for trouble and the parents for heartbreak, from the very beginning.

The story begins like others we have heard this summer. Rebekah is barren. If we tend to the details of scripture, and do the math

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favoritism. Their favoritism is mixed up with a Theology of Scarcity, i.e., there is not enough of anything to go around, so only the select...only the favored...only the smart and good-looking and talented receive devoted attention, excessive love and undeserved grace. This family, in particular, lives with the fear that there is not enough inheritance for everyone. They live by the law of primogeniture where only the first-born, Esau, will receive it all. That is, until Rebekah and Jacob come up with a plan.

Esau has been hunting. He returns home to find Jacob in the kitchen stirring some lovely stew and it smells scrumpuaesent! Famished, Esau comes in, kicks off his boots and says to his brother, "I want some of that stew!" Jacob, clever and opportunistic, asks how badly Esau wants some. Esau, ever the man of his bodily appetites, says, "I am starving here! Give me

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

that stew!" And Jacob slyly says, "I'll give you some stew if you give me your inheritance."

Now, mind you, this is not trading baseball cards. This is no trading like, "I'll watch whatever you want to watch on TV if you will take out the garbage." This is no, "I'll walk the dog tomorrow if you will walk her today." This is: "I'll trade you a bowl of stew for all of Dad's camels and all of Dad's land and all of Dad's cattle and all of Dad's servants!" Esau reasons that a birthright is no good if he dies of starvation first, so he agrees. They strike a deal.

Now every person in this room knows that this is not a good decision. We want to say to Esau, "Think beyond your immediate hunger!" And we want to say to Jacob, "Be fair to your brother!" We want to see the parents intervene and tell these young men to treat each other with respect. While we want to say it to them, I wonder why we don't say these very things to one another.

I've seen it played out in families time and time again. A child finds themselves "in a far country" as scripture likes to call it in Jesus' most famous parable. "A far country" could be any number of things: involvement in sex, drugs and alcohol; or we marry someone of whom our parents disapprove; or we participate in unethical business; or we never visit our parents enough; or our children are unruly; or we slip into the darkness of depression and no one in the family understands; or a million and one other things that label us "black sheep." The one who messed up, who didn't toe the line and live up to expectation. And so the parents say, "I'm writing you out of the will! No inheritance for you!" which is, of course, a subtle way of saying, "I wash my hands of you! You are no longer my child! You

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were never my favorite any way!" Where is the grace in that?

Here is where I have encountered it. Someone, a sibling or remaining parent who is wise and courageous, steps to the forefront to say, "But this is my sister, this is my brother, this is my child who once was dead but is now alive. Let's celebrate by being sure he/she is included in all that we are inheriting." This is not only the right thing to do, it is an example of excessive grace.

It is what we watch the sower do in today's parable told by Jesus.

This parable is familiar to most of us. In it, a sower casts seed on four kinds of ground: the packed ground of a footpath; ground that is full of rocks; ground thick with thorns; and good, fertile ground. A child of the church, I have always wondered which type of ground am I. Am I the hard packed ground in which no seed can grow or am I the fertile ground, receptive to whatever God

wishes to plant in me? To worry over these things, however, is to miss the point of the parable.

You see, Jesus always gives away the focus of his parables in the first words that he speaks. So this parable begins with "A sower went out to sow." This parable is not about us. This parable is about the sower, and this sower is so extravagant that he is not fazed by thistles and thorns or birds and rocks. No, this sower confidently flings seed everywhere. He wastes seed with holy abandon on the rocks and in the thistles. He throws enough seed so that the birds can eat their fill and when he reaches fertile soil, he shouts "Hallelujah!" as he throws another handful or two. There is more than enough seed to go around and at the harvest, every barn is filled to the rafters. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Extravagant Sower," *The Seeds Of Heaven*)

We would never do it this way! Beginning without even a paper clip, we would devise charts and grafts, consult with experts and do research, to make sure there was not one seed wasted! Ours is a neat, logical, efficient operation that concentrates on the good soil! But if this is the parable of the sower, then Jesus is telling us there's another way to go about things. There's another way to

distribute grace and to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, and that is to employ abundant extravagance. It involves handing our grievances and our prejudices and our fear to the Lord so that our hands are free

and open to fling grace abundantly to those desperate to receive a blessing.

It's amazing to witness extravagance at work. For instance:

Through your generosity, we hang Ziploc bags of personal toiletries on our front fence. "Take What You Need" the sign says, and so the items are hung amidst horn honking and the bass thump of radios. Occasionally, horns will honk, so I wave back. Sometimes a window gets rolled down to offer a word of encouragement. Often I am asked about why we are putting things out. I explain in the time allowed before the light turns green. It takes about one afternoon for all the things we hang there to be taken. The

combined visibility of the fence with the recent news blurb on WVTM, a local dermatologist, unsolicited mind you, sent us two crates of deodorant this week! Extravagance!

Through your faithfulness, our ministries at SouthTown have morphed through the years to include literacy, tutoring and Arts Camp. Because of your generosity, we received this week, unsolicited mind you, from outside of the church, a check for \$1000 to help with the ministries occurring at SouthTown. Extravagance!

Every day this week, there has been some reminder that sowing with abandon solicits extravagance in return! It makes for a kinder, gentler world in which stinginess and revenge and rivalry slowly melt away. While some will argue the economics of extravagance, I would submit to you that spiritually, the only viable argument is for a theology of abundant, extravagant sowing that shows no favoritism.

Just imagine how the stories of Genesis would have changed the course of mankind's history if there had been extravagance put into action. If only Sarah's heart could have grown two sizes to include Hagar and Ishmael in kindness. If only Rebekah and Isaac could have found attributes in each son to encourage and of which to be proud. If only Jacob and Esau, in spite of how their parents set it all up, would have vowed that they would make the inheritance right between them so that jealous rivalry would never have been an issue. If only...if only...if only.

Jennifer Grant (*When Did Everybody Else Get so Old?*) writes that in her suburb of Chicago, they have been wrestling with the issue of wild coyotes. Residents are warned that pets make good targets, so they do not need to run freely in the yards, and that should a coyote appear, residents are to shout, clap their hands, stomp their feet and even throw things at the coyotes to scare them away. Churches are notorious for doing the same things when guests appear that look differently, smell differently, believe differently. While our policies and procedures often feel like we are shouting and clapping our hands, we are also adept at slowly sending a message of non-acceptance with extravagant isolation.

So I much prefer the image from the movie *Dancing with Wolves*. A lonely soldier on the outer boundaries of the frontier, begins to be visited by a wolf when the soldier is cooking supper. Skittish and afraid, the wolf runs from any advances that the soldier makes. But the soldier never gives up. The Indians watch from a distance and shake

their heads at this crazy white man who dares to dance with wolves around the campfire. Slowly, with time and gentle kindness, the soldier wins the wolf over as a friend and pet. That's what happens with extravagant sowing on

the hard packed places, in the thistles and thorns and on the rocks. No favorites. All loved and all worth it.

Suzann Smith once gave me this bumper sticker. I proudly display it on my office door. It reads: "Jesus loves you, but I am his favorite." While I may be guilty of secretly believing this about Suzann, let me just say, I also believe that when we get to heaven because of God's extravagant love and grace, that there on God's Hall of Fame will be a 12x18 of St. Peter and right next to it, the same size and in a matching frame will be Sarah Wilson. Next to St. Paul, will be Ronald Williams. Next to John the Baptist will be Richard Martin, and next to St. Luke, will be Twila Fortune. If you have ears to hear, then receive the love of Christ. If you want to be busy sowing the seeds of God's extravagant love in this world, then come join us.

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