There appeared in Time magazine last year a provocative cover story—“Why Mom Liked You Best: The Science of Favoritism.” The article relied heavily on a study conducted by a University of California at Davis professor, who interviewed nearly 400 sets of parents and their children over the course of three years. The study concluded that 65 percent of all moms and 70 percent of all dads exhibited a preference for one child.

There is an asterisk attached to this Time magazine headline. If you follow this punctuation mark to the bottom of the page, the fine print of the footnote reads, “Of course she [meaning mom] will never admit to it.” Parents aspire to love their children equally. Yet, the research tells a different story. Most parents show a bias for one child, whether it be the eldest or the youngest, the most compliant or high-achieving. It results in the unconscious siding with one child in an argument and coming down harder on other children in the family. We know playing favorites is bad for family life, but we can’t seem to resist this unconscious urge.

The rupture between Jacob and Esau has favoritism written all over it. The die is cast at the beginning of the story, when we are told that “Isaac loves Esau but Rebekah loves Jacob” (Genesis 25:26). There’s nothing subtle about the parent’s favoritism. Certainly our narrator knows all about it.

Jacob resents Esau’s privileged status as the first-born in the family. He proceeds to hustle his brother’s birthright and deceive his father into giving him the blessing reserved for the eldest son. As Esau plots his revenge, Jacob seeks safe haven with his mother’s brother Laban. Jacob falls madly in love with Rachel, Laban’s daughter. But Uncle Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob and substitutes Leah at the 11th hour. I talked about this strange turn of events last Sunday. Suffice it to say it’s a long story!

Jacob now finds himself married to two sisters. We left off last Sunday with the ominous words, “Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah” (29:30). Playing favorites is something of a learned behavior in the Ben Isaac family.

God institutes marriage as the union of one man and one
woman in Genesis. Two’s company and three’s a crowd where marriage is concerned. Yet, this two-party covenant evolves into a love triangle. This ensuing love triangle takes sibling rivalry to a whole new level.

The problem, in psychological terms, is something called “triangulation.” In a relational triangle, one party is always on the outside looking in. This is Leah’s plight. She is the odd person out in this three-party arrangement.

Yet, God shows mercy to unloved Leah. We read in verse 31, “When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb.” God repeatedly shows mercy to unloved people in Scripture.

So much attention is devoted to having babies in this story that some of you will conclude it’s over the top. But let me remind you of something. The most important contribution a woman could make in a family household in those days was to present her husband with children. A woman’s identity and place in society were wrapped up in having children. I know, it seems excessive to our 21st century sensibilities, but this story will make little sense unless we understand this fact of Old Testament life.

Leah gives birth to four sons over the course of the seven years Jacob works for Rachel’s hand in marriage. The name of the firstborn, Reuben, means “The Lord has seen my affliction.” The name Simeon, the secondborn son, is translated “The Lord has heard that I am not loved.” The third son, Levi, his name means “attached.” Leah hopes that her baby-making prowess will cause Jacob to become attached to her. The name of the fourth son, Judah, literally translates, “I will praise the Lord.”

God indeed shows mercy to unloved Leah. Levi’s ancestors produce the priestly lineage of Israel. Moses and Aaron both originate from Levi’s lineage. Judah’s ancestry is also noteworthy. King David comes from this royal line. So does Jesus, for that matter. How ironic that God chooses an unloved woman to bring forth the lineage of our Messiah.

Meanwhile, Rachel, the loved one, is unable to conceive. Her infertility sends her into a tailspin. She becomes insanely jealous of Leah and takes her jealousy out on Jacob (30:1). Her lament, “Give me children or I’ll die,” demonstrates how her identity is tied to having children (30:2).

Jacob responds to her plight with a rhetorical question of his own: “Am I in the place of God?” Well, come to think of it, Jacob, you’ve been playing God for most of your life. At least you know you can’t play God on this one.

Rachel takes matters into her own hands and makes it possible for one of her servants, Bilhah, to act as a surrogate...
mother. Two sons result from this union with Jacob: Dan and Naphthali.

Leah, not to be outdone, arranges for a surrogate, also. Jacob has two sons with her maid, Zilpah: Gad and Asher. I’m struck with how Jacob, the con man, is so easily manipulated by these dueling sisters.

Our story takes a more bizarre turn when Rachel attempts to buy some man-drakes from Leah’s oldest son, Reuben. This common plant functioned as something of an aphrodisiac in those days. While Leah buys some of Reuben’s “love apples,” Leah produces two more sons with Jacob: Issachar and Zebulun.

Everybody seems to conceive children in this story; everyone except Rachel. It’s striking how often infertility factors into this Genesis story. Finally, we’re told in verse 22, “God remembered Rachel.” She becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Joseph, and later a second son, Benjamin.

When it’s all been said and done, surrogate mothers and aphrodisiacs count for nothing. Rachel conceives because God remembers her. Earlier in Genesis, we are told that God remembers Noah. God shows mercy to unloved and infertile women alike. God remembers Leah. God remembers Rachel. God doesn’t forget people in distress.

People go to extremes to get what they want in this story. It becomes counterproductive whenever they try to force the issue. It turns out there are limits to our striving. Some things happen only because God remembers.

Everybody grabs for what he wants. Can we come to the place where we can cease our grabbing and trust God for the things necessary to support our lives? Some things happen only because God remembers.

If you’re looking for heroes, we must reckon with the grim assessment that nobody fares very well in this story. Leah’s desperate measures to win Jacob’s love fail miserably. Rachel’s insane jealousy of her sister does not serve her well. And Jacob is still grabbing for all the gusto.

Talk about life is messy. We’ve got a disastrous love triangle, surrogate parents, sibling rivalry and jealousy in spades. Yet, God is the main protagonist in this drama. The whole point of the story is that God is the hero here. Despite the mess, God prevails.

It’s official now. Jacob’s family is a colossal mess. Yet, God prevails in this dysfunctional family to fulfill a major promise given to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham: “I will bless you so that all the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (12:3).

If your life is messy and your family is dysfunctional, then you qualify for God’s service. You aren’t disqualified because you’re not spiritual enough or don’t know enough.
If Jacob, Leah and Rachel pass muster, you do, also. God can prevail in your life! Jacob’s life is proof of it.

I’ve decided this morning to close with a declaration. If this declaration expresses your intentions, you are invited to stand. At any point in his declaration, you may decide to stand to express your intentions to God and in the company of these people. Please relax with this invitation. Don’t treat it as pressure; respond as you see fit. There is no shame in remaining seated and no inherent virtue in standing. But if standing expresses your new resolve to live for God and things that really matter, then by all means, stand.

Today, Lord, I’m crossing the line. I’ve made my choice. I’m going your way!

I’ve decided to become a real disciple. Not a Sunday-only, pretend type of Christian but the real deal, a true believer.

I pledge to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, my energy and creativity, my love and devotion, my gifts and resources. I endeavor to become like Christ, together for the world. Whatever you ask, wherever the cost, whatever it takes, I will follow you, Jesus.

I give myself to the body of Christ, the church. I’m done with petty bickering, needless gossip and hurtful words. No more deceit, Lord, no more phoniness. I will treat people with dignity and respect.

I will treat every day as a gift from you. I intend to live this day with joy and gratitude; enough of whining and endless complaining.

I will practice generosity. I will invest more time and money to support your work in the world. No more lip service. I will learn your Word and practice its principles. Prevailing cultural influences will now take a back seat. I will worship more and evaluate less. I will pray in earnest.

From this day forward, I resolve to love the Lord and love the people, to serve the Lord and serve the people. Amen.