“Family Feud”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Obadiah, verses 10-15
June 22, 2014
If this sermon doesn’t hang together, I have a ready-made alibi. I spent a week at the beach with my three young grandsons. Let’s just say it’s challenging to prepare a sermon in the same house with three boys ranging in age from four years to nine months.

We’re devoting a summer’s worth of sermons to the Minor Prophets. You might say we’re majoring on the minors this summer. Our theme, as we’ve said previously, is “Minor Prophets—Major Message.”

Thus far we’ve preached on the books of Hosea, Joel and Amos. Today, our featured Minor Prophet is someone named Obadiah. Most of you have never heard of Obadiah. Who would know where to find this obscure book without a Table of Contents?

Obadiah is a forgotten prophet in Scripture. The book that bears his name is the shortest book in the Old Testament, 21 verses in all. Some of you originate from churches that utilize a lectionary, a suggested list of readings for each Sunday over a three year cycle. There is not a single reference to Obadiah in this three year list of readings. I don’t ever recall preaching a sermon on Obadiah. I’ve never heard a sermon on Obadiah for that matter.

Obadiah isn’t high on the list of names expectant parents choose for their sons. I’ve never actually met anyone with the name Obadiah. The only reference to Obadiah I’ve ever encountered is the fictitious supervillain Obadiah Stane in the Marvel Comic Series Iron Man.

On the surface, Obadiah is a story about two rival nations. Yet, if you rewind this back to the beginning, you’ll find these two nations originate from the same family.

Isaac and Rebecca gave birth to twin boys. The younger was born grabbing the heel of his older brother Esau, so his parents called him Jacob, meaning “heel grabber.” Jacob stayed true to his name and forever grabbed what belonged to his brother. First, Jacob hustled his brother to finagle his birthright for a bowl of stew. Then, he deceived
his father by engineering the blessing reserved for the eldest son.

Jacob’s descendants are called Israelites. Esau’s offspring eventuate into a nation called Edom. Their descendants feud with each other for generations on end.

These Israelites are overrun by the superpower Assyria and taken into exile. God puts these Edomites on notice for mistreating their blood relations. “The pride of your heart has deceived you. You who live in the cleft of the rock and make your home in the heights say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to the ground?’ Though you soar like the eagle, I will bring you down, says the Lord” (verses 2-4).

God holds Edom responsible for taking advantage of Israel. Verses 11-15 chronicle their neglect and abuse. Our passage reads like a steady progression of missed opportunities. First, they stand aloof when Israel is taken into exile in verse 11. Then, in verse 12, they refuse to offer help. In verse 13, they gloat over Israel’s misfortune and, in verse 14, construct a blockade in the wilderness to pick off their brothers and annex some of their land.

This is no way to treat a brother. “Because of the violence against your brother,” Obadiah cautions, “you will be defeated” (verse 10). He warns, “You should not look down on your brother on the day of his misfortune” (verse 12).

The repetition of the word “day” is purposeful in our text. Seven times within four verses the phrase “on the day” or “in the day” appears. Each day provides the Edomites with the opportunity to do right by their brothers. Yet, each day adds to the list of injustices for which God holds them responsible. Everything culminates in a coming “Day of the Lord” (verse 15). It will be a day of judgment and blessing: judgment on the Edomites for refusing help and blessing on the Israelites for being victimized. On this Day of the Lord, the saying, “As you have done, it will be done to you,” will come true. What goes around comes around.

So, what difference does Obadiah and this sermon make in my life? I identify three lessons from our text. Since I’m hard pressed to decide
which to talk about, I’ve decided to share all three in the hope that one will speak into your life today.

The first lesson is a warning against pride. Obadiah spoke to Edom on God’s behalf, “Your pride has deceived you” (verse 3). Pride deceives us into thinking that it’s all about me. I don’t need God; I can manage life pretty much on my own. Pride has a way of minimizing God and magnifying the self.

Illusory superiority is the trait that causes people to overestimate their positive abilities and underestimate their negative capacities. Eighty-seven percent of MBA students at Stanford University rate their academic performance as above average. Sixty-eight percent of faculty members at the University of Nebraska rank their teaching ability in the top 25 percent. Ninety percent of us rank ourselves as above average drivers. It’s called the Lake Wobegon effect, named after Garrison Keillor’s fictitious town, “Where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are above average.”

C.S. Lewis writes, “There is one vice of which no one in the world is free, which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people ever imagine they are guilty of themselves….There is no fault which makes us more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves.”

“God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34).

The second lesson is a call to brotherhood; a summons to a shared humanity. Esau and Jacob are blood brothers; yet, they persist in behaving like bitter rivals. They play an age-old game called family feud.

One of Paul’s favorite metaphors for the church is that of family. We are God’s family; brothers and sisters in a common allegiance to Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul is so critical of what gossiping and backbiting do to the family of God.

One issue right now tearing at the fabric of this church family concerns same-sex marriage. Our PCUSA denomination, at its General Assembly last week, passed two controversial motions. The first allows pastors to
officiate at same-sex marriages in states where it is legal. Second, it recommends to presbyteries that our denomination change its Book of Order constitution to redefine marriage as between two persons.

As I mentioned in a June 1st sermon, our Session has been anticipating this action for some time now. We’ve written a pastoral letter to our congregation to suggest a way forward that is available on our website and in printed form in the lobby.

There are three ways to approach this issue in our church family. One way is to appeal to personal experience. While human experience has much to teach us, the appeal to personal experience is rather subjective and arbitrary. The second way is to consult medical and social sciences. Is homosexuality genetic in people? I agree with the American Medical Association that every person is a complex amalgam of both nature and nurture causal factors in determin-ing orientation and behavior. So, to press the issue by an appeal to genetics is inconclusive. The third way is to determine what Scripture affirms about marriage. After all, one of our three core beliefs is that Scripture is our authority. Many of you have asked my opinion on the same-sex marriage question. My opinion doesn’t matter; the only thing that counts is what Scripture teaches on the issue. I’m convinced Scripture affirms marriage as a covenantal union between one man and one woman. As I said on June 1st, how we deal with this issue is every bit as important as what we believe about marriage. We must deal with this concern as respected brothers and sisters in the faith, not as descendants of Jacob and Esau who were locked in a perpetual family feud.

Our third lesson, which is an appeal to God’s sovereignty, serves to humble us when we become too smug or self-assured of our position on the issues. Jacob and Easu are not sovereign. Israel and Edom are not sovereign. Only God is sovereign.

Nick Vujicic was born in 1982 without arms or legs; only two small feet attached to his torso. Nick struggled emotionally and spiritually to cope with his rare genetic disorder. Nick lives what he calls a “ridiculously good life.” He writes,
“When I’m asked how I can claim a ridiculously good life when I have no arms or legs, [people] assume I’m suffering from what I lack. They wonder how I could possibly give my life to God, who allowed me to be born without limbs…. They are prone to congratulate me for being victorious over my disabilities. I tell them my victory comes in surrender. It comes every day when I acknowledge that I can’t do this on my own, so I say to God, ‘I give it to you!’ As I yield, the Lord takes my pain and turns it into something positive. God gave my life meaning when no one and nothing else could provide it. If God can take someone like me without arms and legs and use me as his hands and feet, he can use anybody. It’s not about ability. The only thing God needs from you is a willing heart.”

I didn’t know how to pronounce Nick’s last name, so I looked it up on the Internet this morning. I came across a YouTube on CBN that gripped me. Nick asked God at an early age, why did you make me this way? He determined at age eight to take his life by drowning. He couldn’t go through with it, but persisted in asking God why he was made without arms and legs. At age 15, he heard a message on John 9 about a man born blind. When people ask Jesus why this man was born blind, Jesus says so that the works of God might be manifest in him. Nick is now a worldwide evangelist for the Christian faith. He lives what might be called a ridiculously good life.

As Nick comments in the video, God hasn’t forgotten about your pain. Maybe you are in pain today about something. We can trust God’s benevolent sovereignty in our lives. Some days it doesn’t seem as if God is working on our behalf. Yet, things aren’t always what they seem. “We see only through a mirror dimly yet one day we will see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). One day it will become apparent that all God’s ways are gracious and merciful.