

*Duplicity and Deceit.* A sermon preached on July 31, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Scripture: GENESIS 27:1-48

DMG my girls would text if they were hearing for the first time the story that Karenza has so well recounted for us.

This is a story of sibling rivalry and parental favoritism writ large.

It is certainly one of the most masterfully conceived dramas in the Bible

Imagine watching it unfold on a stage divided into two areas: inside the old patriarch Isaac's tent and just outside it – beyond his failing sight, but no necessarily beyond his hearing.

It is a set piece worthy of Shakespeare or another more modern playwright.

In fact, I can well imagine Julien Fellowes, creator and writer of *Downton Abby* having at go with this scene

Again, though this is not a script from a play – this is a story from the Bible – specifically a story about the Bible's first family!

Standing just outside Isaac's tent, Rebekah overhears Isaac's request.

She is haunted by the prophecy revealed to her by God during her very painful pregnancy

**'Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;  
one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger.'** (Gen. 25:23)

Twenty years Rebekah has kept quiet, watching and waiting for this promise to be fulfilled

Now Isaac lies dying

In an hour or so, Isaac would formally bless Esau and anoint him as the leader of the next generation,

What to do?

Remain faithful to her husband or to God's vision for her family?

If God *has elected* Jacob to lead,

Who is Isaac to deny her younger son what God had promised?

This morning's lesson tells us her decision and how she accomplishes it – through duplicity.

This morning's lesson also recounts Jacob's clear deceit of Father Isaac.

As for Esau – in a few verses he goes from being his father's favorite to feeling he no longer has a place at the table.

Last week, we saw Esau to be the quintessential boor – poster boy for coarse behavior and horrendous table manners!

In this morning's lesson, he is reduced to tears.

Esau is a man of action, not used to intrigues in the tent or other places.

Esau can deal with his “little” brother’s heightened sense of his own importance. Esau probably can even handle the knowledge that his father has always liked Jacob best.

But to see Rebekah and Jacob’s machinations and seemingly joint-scheming being acted out with him as the victim – this is serious, very serious indeed.

When Isaac informs Esau that there is no other blessing to offer, Esau sees red and his blood lust boils, That little piece of work my birthright and now he has taken my blessing – I will kill him.

So much lost in deception

- ✓ Esau sees his father as a too willing party in this deception
- ✓ His mother’s part in the deception – she obviously loves Jacob more
- ✓ In that moment, Esau wishes both his father and brother dead

I wonder--how does Esau feel about himself and Jacob – yes, he has the blessing, but at a high price. His brother has sworn revenge and that is not idle threat – that is promise!

Jacob must now flee into exile. He cannot stick around. The fear he has about Esau’s revenge will plague his every day life and condition too many of his future thoughts.

In one fateful encounter then, Isaac has in essence lost both his children to Jacob – his concern is not that his actions are deceitful, only that he may get caught (vs. 11, 12) What a family! What a mess!

Beyond that *what can we say?*

I think it is very human, maybe inevitable, that every parent develops a closer rapport, A stronger relationship with one child over another or others.

Genesis makes no attempt to disguise Isaac and Rebekah’s partiality from the very beginning.

As this is perhaps an innate tendency in each of us who become parents, This story is a clear reminder that each of us who are parents must *endeavor to be especially vigilant in our efforts to make every child in our family feel unique and special to us.*

Our Ruth and Jane are almost 6 years to the day different in age  
In many ways, we have two only children  
To their periodic complaints and whines that we give more to the other than them,  
Or that we favor one over the other  
Or that we do more with one than the other – I never got to do this with you guys!!  
We say with parental firmness and love  
NOT SO

You may not have the same experiences, treats, gifts simply because mom and dad are at different life stage.

We cannot precisely recreate the experiences Ruth had for Jane

Nor Jane had for Ruth

First because you girls are very different and unique to yourself

And second, we are at different life stages than we were when each of you were growing up

Ruth will always be our first born.

Jane will always be God's gift to aging parents.

So while we cannot give you each the same experiences, we do try very intentionally to be equal and fair.

So let's hear no more of this – you never let me do

this when I was her age,

I never got that when I was her age

Or you love her better than me

WE love you both!!

The other thing which Katharine and I have always tried to avoid – which Isaac and Rebekah could not – *we try not to draw our children into our relationship as husband and wife.*

Couples who have great differences between them in age I believe have to be especially sensitive that they do not draw their children into shifting power balances in their marriage.

There is no reason to believe otherwise that Isaac and Rebekah's marriage begins as

intensely romantic and we are given to believe, passionate.

But unlike Sarah and Abraham, who remain equal partners throughout their lives, Rebekah and Isaac drift apart.

I wonder is it owing to the age difference between them.

I wonder is it owing to Isaac's mental and physical decline.

By the time of the boys' birth, the story leads us to believe, Isaac and Rebekah seem to have lost touch with the intimacy that characterized the earlier years of their marriage.

They pair off with their respective favorites and immediately create a stage for trouble!

I think each child benefits in the short run from the intense devotion of a single parent.

Ruth and Jane have and continue so to do.

However, each child needs the balance of BOTH male and female role models Continued and intentional aggressively practiced favoritism of one child over another or others is deadly and destructive.

This particular story from Genesis 27 recounts what runs through much of the story of the Biblical first family – and that is *sibling rivalry unchecked and unfettered.*

You who have brothers and sisters know precisely of what I speak

You who are a parent of more than one child know precisely of what I speak.

Sibling rivalry is a theme of books, plays, TV shows and film. It's just there.

How it is played or acted out or even if it is an "issue" is dependent upon several factors.

Here in the Jacob cycle of stories, we have the effects of unchecked sibling rivalry – destructive, nasty and corrosive

And, generational – Isaac – Jacob – Joseph.

Growing up as an only child, I had no firsthand experience of sibling rivalry

However, I saw its truth all around me – in neighborhood families and among close friends – who in the family was Herb's best friend?

I saw it on school yards and in team sports. Sometimes I still see it in siblings of my age.

And I witnessed it acted out between my father and his two brothers.

Let me share with you a story from my Dad's family attesting to 'out of control' sibling rivalry. Our family knows this story simply as "Uncle Jack and the oranges."

June 1984, the evening before my Dad's funeral, my mother, her brother and his wife, Katharine and I and my Dad's surviving brother, Uncle Jack, are sitting in the living room of my family home.

We are telling and sharing stories about my Dad – funny stories, good, happy stories, grateful for his life lived stories

Then with no preamble, Uncle Jack says "Ed (my DAD) always got the oranges and I hated him for it."

Now! From where did that come?

We did not have to wait long for the answer – for all eyes were focused on Uncle Jack waiting for him to continue.

I was 8 or 9 and I was asked by Mother several times over the spring and summer of that year to drop whatever I was doing or planned to do,

to bike to Silenzi's green grocery and get an orange for Edwin. (my DAD)

Mother would call upstairs if I was in my room or call me from the porch if I was outside in the yard and say, "Here's a nickel Jack, go get an orange for Edwin" It was not a request – it was an order!

When I got back with the orange, mother would take the orange from my hand and say to Ed, my dear brother, here's your orange Edwin! He always got those oranges, and I hated him for it!!!

The story just hung there – what do you say after hearing such a story about your parent who has recently died?

Uncle Jack left shortly after, as did my mother's brother and his wife, leaving my mother

Katharine and I to reflect on what we had heard during the evening  
 I came back to Uncle Jack and the oranges – “Wow, did you see the veins on his neck as he told this story and how his hands tensed and his voice lightened.  
 It was like it had happened yesterday or last week and he’s was re-telling something that happened what 50 years ago?  
 But man, he’s still very bitter.  
 He may be wearing a tailored seersucker summer suit, crisp white shirt and striped tie and Dack shoes this evening,  
 But listening to him tell the story, all of us saw a 9 year old wearing shorts, argyle socks, buster brown shoes,  
 Glaring at my Dad and probably hoping his dear brother, chocked on an orange pit!!  
 We were not in June 1984 – we were back in the late 1920’s.  
 ‘Frightening”, I remember saying  
 My mother was very quiet through all of this and then she said, “You do not know the half of it Herb”. I had never heard that story, but I am not surprised – for all the stories I know around the Hilder brothers centre on how they did not get along;  
 How they fought over everything.

And it wore and worried you Dad most of his life as he tried to keep the peace between the other two brothers.  
 How sad, my mother continued – what a waste when they could have enjoyed each other’s company and support as my family did and do.  
 Mom was right – her sisters and brothers had disagreements and spats, but they all remained close and helpful to and with each other until their dying days  
 Owing to the sibling rivalry between 3 Hilder boys – irresponsible and hasty decisions were made in matters financial  
 Division of possessions when my grandmother died taken to a ridiculous level  
 Relationships with the sisters in law were fractured and this carried into the next generation.  
 Though I have 4 first cousins on that side of the family – I am only in regular contact with one – and it has nothing to do with distance.  
 So unnecessary and so preventable – if my grandparents – particularly my grandmother had monitored their actions – am I being fair?  
 My grandmother could have said “here’s an orange for you and Edwin to share.  
 Or she could have said, Jack here are two nickels – would you please go to Silenzi’s and get two oranges – one for Edwin and one for yourself.  
 But she did not!

And this whole sibling rivalry stuff that  
preoccupied the Hilder boys could have ended if  
they had said among themselves – maybe it is time  
to grow up!!!

There are no perfect families –  
Not this side of heaven  
There are just human families for whom living as a  
family sometimes seems two steps forward and 4  
steps back  
And maybe that's where we must leave Jacob this  
morning.  
For the text does not suggest some grand purpose  
*only that the promise of God continues through this  
party to human deceit – Jacob.*  
In that though, we are clearly reminded that parents  
must be vigilant in ensuring all their children are  
reated fairly and equally.  
And we are also reminded of the dangers of  
unchecked sibling rivalry, not only in the present,  
out into the generations that follow.  
AMEN