

I've been thinking this week of Esau and Jacob. Some people have been thinking of Michael Phelps winning the gold in Beijing, or Bridget Sloan, our fellow Hendricks Countian, performing so ably and admirably. Some people have been thinking of the hostility between Georgia and Russia and the long history of Eastern European strife. Some people have been thinking of school and the summer winding to a close. There have been any number of things to think about this week, but I've been thinking about Esau and Jacob. That is so like a pastor. The world could be plunging into a global crisis, on the verge of World War III, and pastors would sit around and dwell upon minor Biblical characters from four thousand years ago.

Probably that is because the Bible, though set in a particular time, is timeless. So I read about the treachery and arrogance of world leaders, how willing they are to push people in front of the train in their quest to be first, and I think of Jacob and Rebekah scheming to steal Esau's birthright and inheritance, a mother and twin taking advantage of a dying father's diminished capacity to cheat the other twin.

Esau and Jacob. Twin brothers. Esau, a hunter, a man of the fields, impetuous, but dear to his father. Jacob, quiet, reserved, calculating, but dear to his mother. Isaac, their father, wealthy, but naïve, in a good way, never suspecting his family of disloyalty. And Rebekah, manipulative, plotting against her husband to secure a blessing for her favorite son. And God, predicting it all, telling Rebekah on the day Jacob and Esau were born, “Two nations are in your womb and two people, born of you, shall be divided. One shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.” Wouldn’t that make you look forward to having children?

So the treachery unfolds. Esau is cheated and vows revenge. Jacob flees for his life, taking refuge with his crooked uncle, who proceeds to cheat him. Such irony, the cheater being cheated. Both Jacob and Esau marry, accumulate wealth and power, but never speak to one another. The years go by. Esau passes near Jacob’s land leading an army of four hundred men. Jacob is terrified, fearing his brother is bent on revenge. But when Esau sees his brother, his twin, he is filled with compassion, and he runs to his brother Jacob, who had cheated him, and kisses him, and they fall to the ground, these two old men, overcome with regret, weeping, lamenting the events which had separated them.

I've read this story many times and have always thought the same thing, "These people need family therapy." I mean, look at them. Their lives were torn apart by poor choices. All their lessons were learned the hard way. They were never smart enough soon enough. They were duplicitous when they should have been honest. They betrayed the people they should have loved. This family was made for *The Jerry Springer Show*.

It puts God in a terrible bind. God had promised Abraham to build a nation through his descendants. So along came Isaac, Abraham's son, who was kind of clueless, and didn't marry well. Then Jacob, who was scheming and manipulative. This is not the best of clay from which to build a pot. But God had made a promise. So God said to Jacob, "The first thing we have to do is change your name." The word Jacob meant *supplanter*, which means "to supercede by force or treachery." It's a name that really limits your opportunities. Like naming your kid Jeeves. You shouldn't be surprised if he grows up to be a butler.

So God told Jacob, "From now on, you are to be called Israel." Israel means *one who wrestles with God*. I like that name, if only because it suggests God doesn't mind being challenged. I have the feeling God admired Jacob's spunk. Jacob has made poor choices, but he's learned from them. Now God is ready to use him.

You might remember that the next time you make a bad choice and are having to suffer the consequences. Is it a waste? Not if you've learned from it. I like what Will Rogers said, "The worst thing that happens to you can be the best thing for you, if you don't let it get the best of you."

Jacob made some bad choices, deceived his father and betrayed his brother. Then others deceived him, betrayed him. But Jacob made things right, learned from his mistakes, and in that process became Israel, a blessing to others.

I am continually amazed how something good and beautiful can have its origins in treachery and ill will, but it happens.

I was driving home the other night from a speech, listening to the radio and an Eagles song came on. My favorite all-time group. They sing and play so well together, I assumed they were close friends. But just a few days before I'd read an article about the fights and conflicts they'd had over the years. Bitter, bitter disagreements, even lawsuits. Splitting up, getting back together, splitting again. I read that article and wondered to myself, "How can something so good come from something so imperfect."

Then I thought of Esau and Jacob, of two people pulled apart, estranged, then reconciled, of this great mystery in life. How if I were God, I

would have made it so everyone always did the right and loving thing. Then I thought how success is such a poor teacher, and the lessons that stick with us are so often the ones we learn in hard times. And I thought how so many times I have seen God do beautiful, wondrous things through flawed people.

I remember when I came here nine years ago to be your pastor. Drove over from Danville to be interviewed, and I was on my best behavior. I'd prepared myself, working all day on my résumé. By the time I was done writing it, I didn't recognize myself. I left a few things off it. I forgot to mention I had been fired from my first church. At my second church I started with a group of thirty Quakers, worked hard for four years, and by the time I left there were twenty-eight. I didn't mention that, either. I wanted you to think I'd be a perfect pastor. I suspect by now you no longer suffer under that delusion.

We want so hard to be perfect, and we expect perfection in others. We want to hire the perfect worker, marry the perfect spouse, raise perfect children, be perfect parents. God seems to take the opposite approach.

“Let's see what I can do with a flawed vessel,” God said. “I'll pick as my spokesperson, a man who stutters,” and gave the world Moses.

“I believe I’ll start a nation with a man who betrayed his father and cheated his twin.”

“Watch what I can do with a peasant child, born to a carpenter.”

“Let’s see how I can work through twelve reluctant disciples.”

“Let’s see the healing and joy I can bring to people through a handful of Quakers at Fairfield.”

The Apostle Paul was his own worst enemy. You read about this guy and every other day he’s shooting himself in the foot. He’s his own worst enemy. And he knows it. So he prays to God to make him perfect, to remove his faults. God doesn’t do it. Three times Paul prays to God to make him perfect, to take away all his faults, all his handicaps. God finally tells him, “Look, Paul, you quit focusing on your handicaps and start appreciating your gifts. My grace is enough for you. My strength shines best in your weakness.” (a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

This is a great irony in life, and one I don’t claim to understand—that sometimes the weaker we get, the stronger we become.