

McCabe United Methodist Church
Foundational Stories Series
“Our Family Tree: Which Part Defines You”
Sermon on Genesis 25:19-34 and 27:1-45a (7/9 & 7/20/14)
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Most holy God, grant that what we speak with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the last week, the internet was lit on fire by the video for a song by pop star Colbie Caillat. The song is called “Try” and it is a gentle, but very powerful attack on our culture's obsession with appearances. (According to news reports, in this song and video, the singer is more directly attacking Photoshop and the different ways in which images are modified digitally to make people look more “perfect” than they really are.¹)

Some of the song's lyrics go like this: “Put your makeup on / Get your nails done / Curl your hair / Run the extra mile / Keep it slim so they like you / Do they like you? ... Get your shopping on, at the mall, max your credit cards / You don't have to choose, buy it all, so they like you / Do they like you?”

“Wait a second / Why should you care what they think of you / When you're all alone, by yourself, do you like you? / Do you like you?”

And the chorus says this: “You don't have to try so hard / You don't have to give it all away ... You don't have to try so hard / You don't have to bend until you break / You just have to get up, get up, get up / You don't have to change a single thing...”

Throughout the video, while the song is being sung, a handful of women appear on the screen, one-by-one, lip syncing, so it appears as though they are singing the song themselves. The women who appear range in age from early adolescence all the way up to their 70's. The women also range in body type and ethnicity.

At the beginning of the video, each woman appears onscreen all dolled-up: flawless make-up, enhanced eyelashes, wrinkles and freckles covered or hidden somehow, hair perfectly full and coiffed.

But, as the song is sung and the video continues, each woman goes through a

¹ For one example, go to <http://www.buzzfeed.com/melissaharrison/colbie-caillat-no-makeup-music-video>.

“makeunder”...

wiping off their make-up, pulling off fake eye lashes, removing hair extensions...air brushing is magically removed to reveal blemishes and wrinkles – one of the women even removes her wig, revealing a head made bald from cancer treatments.

And the *best* part is that, through each *makeunder*, the women smile, letting their inner *and* their outer beauty shine...naturally. As they are.

We live in a culture that encourages comparisons and that encourages the appearance of perfection: if we're not one to focus on our physical appearance, we might instead look at the family down the street and wish *our* family could be like theirs...we might look at the career track of a colleague and find ourselves jealous...we might wish our children were as successful as the children of our friends...we might wish our parents were better in some way.

We might wish we had the phone or the car or the house or the clothes or the body or the job or the health of...whomever. Our culture trains us to make comparisons and to think we are just not good enough.

Way too many different things in our culture want to have a say in defining who we are or who we *should* be. Way too many things want to have a say in what's best for us...and, if we're not careful, we can find ourselves in various kinds of trouble for letting unhelpful, unhealthy things define us.

For example, I used to think it was perfectly fine for me to buy whatever I wanted to buy – or to spend the money to go wherever I wanted to go – as long as I didn't exceed my credit limit and as long as I made the minimum payment on my credit cards each month...but, it turned out that that was not, actually, what was best for me – as evidenced by my rising debt.

Thankfully, about six years ago, God helped me change that particular way of thinking and behaving to a way that is far more healthy.

My stuff and my desire to have more and better stuff had been defining me in a way that was not good for my budget and that was not good for *me*. I still struggle with that way of thinking sometimes, but God has brought me a long way in the last six years. In fact, with my next paycheck, I'll be making my last student loan payment and will *finally* be debt-free!

Well. Although our readings from Genesis say nothing about money or about mainstream media or about making comparisons or about Photoshopped

perfection, they *do* say a whole lot about identity...these readings *do* say a whole lot about what defines us.

In worship here at McCabe Church we are working our way through a sermon and worship series called *Foundational Stories*. This series is based on a handful of readings from Genesis, the first book in the Bible, and we'll be spending time on this series for at least the next month.

The reason these stories in the book of Genesis are, as the series title suggests, “foundational,” is that these stories are about the birth of the Jewish people – the birth of the Israelites. These were Jesus' own people and, as followers of Jesus, we Christians place ourselves within the Israelite family tree. So, to learn about the foundation for the people of Israel is to learn about our *own* foundation as Christian people.

And, as anyone who knows anything about construction and architecture will tell you, if a building doesn't have a strong foundation, even if it looks good and stands for a while, it won't last or hold up in a storm. So, too, if we Christians don't have a good handle on our own foundation as followers of Jesus Christ, our faith may grow weak. And we discover our foundation in the stories of Genesis.

Today we have arrived in chapters 25 and 27 of Genesis. In the first week of our series, we heard the most foundational story of all: the story of how God created the universe, of how God gave humans a special place within the Creation, and of how we humans were invited into a unique relationship with our Creator God, our heavenly Parent.

That was Genesis chapter 1. Last week we fast-forwarded to Genesis chapter 22 where we were introduced to Abraham, Sarah, and their precious and only son, Isaac.

As Genesis tells it, this little family was the first family that chose to follow our God as their God. God invited Abraham to promise to be faithful and Abraham said “yes.”

Though we did not read Genesis chapter 12, it is in chapter 12 that we learn of this promise – this covenant – made between God and Abraham. And, because Abraham promised to be faithful to this God, God promised Abraham three things:

One – that Abraham would be the father of many descendants. Two – that Abraham's descendants would be given the land we now call Israel. And three – that Abraham's descendants would be blessed to be a blessing to the world.

This is what we call “the Abrahamic Covenant” and, again, it was a three-part promise by God to Abraham: part one was descendants, part two was land, and part three was that they would be a blessing to the world.

Throughout this *Foundational Stories* series, I will likely remind us over and over and over again of this three-fold promise, this Abrahamic Covenant, because it is the foundational promise that defines the life of the Israelite people. We Christians have interpreted this Covenant for ourselves in our own way...but that is another sermon for another day.

Keeping this promise of God in mind, let's turn to today's story...

Today's stories from Genesis chapters 25 and 27 are about a dysfunctional family, of sorts...and today's stories are stories that might stir-up some uncomfortable feelings about your own family.

By this point in Genesis, we are now focused on Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac...and, in chapters 25 and 27, we are given a snapshot of Isaac and wife Rebekah's family: we learn about the birth of their twin sons, Esau and Jacob.

We learn that Esau was the bigger, stronger of the two and that Jacob was smaller, weaker. We learn, from the get-go, that Esau and Jacob were not necessarily the best of friends – despite the fact that they were twins. We learn that, even in Rebekah's womb, the two brothers fought...and that Jacob had been struggling – literally, grabbing at Esau's heel – to be the firstborn...yet Esau won that particular struggle.

We learn that there was favoritism in this little family: that Isaac preferred Esau and that Rebekah preferred Jacob. We don't learn much about the reason for this favoritism – only that Esau was perhaps more naturally inclined to favor activities his father favored, and that Jacob was perhaps a bit more of a “mama's boy.”

But, not only were the parents' preferences clear for one twin over the other, their birth order meant something important. Because Esau was the oldest, he would receive more of his father's property as inheritance.

And, because he was the oldest and the favored son, Esau would also receive a special blessing from their father. So there was a birthright *and* a blessing for Esau...but, in today's story, we learned how Jacob and Rebekah schemed together so that Jacob could steal both the birthright *and* the blessing from his older brother.

Rebekah had received a promise from God that her younger son would be lord over her older son – that Jacob would rule over Esau – and so she and Jacob took matters into their own hands in order to make this promise come true on *their* terms.

First, Jacob caught Esau at a weak moment and traded him a pot of stew for his birthright...and then, years later, Rebekah guided Jacob through a process of deceiving Isaac into giving Jacob the fatherly blessing that should have gone to Esau.

The whole mess is really quite awful: parents who obviously favor one child over the other, children who don't get along, a younger son who brazenly takes advantage of his older brother, a mother who plots against her husband, and a father who doesn't seem to have a clue what exactly is going on in his family.

Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob are the very definition of a “dysfunctional family.” But the key piece of information we do not learn from today's story is that God sticks with this family – despite their lies, despite their deception...despite their dysfunction.

In my sermon two weeks ago about the Creation in Genesis chapter one, I offered you a quote by Christian writer Marva Dawn from her book *In the Beginning* and I'm going to offer you that quote again. She said, “We can too naturally tend toward asking what the Bible says and means for our benefit instead of what it says about God, and how its purpose ultimately is to draw us into worship.”²

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So, even as we ponder today's story from Genesis chapters 25 and 27 – this story about our foundationally dysfunctional family – we are *still* asked to discover what it says about God. We are still asked to think about how even this story invites us to know God more, to love God more, and to worship God with our very lives.

And when I think about this story in that way, I think of this as a story of God's amazing, foundational grace. For this story about Jacob is a story about God's commitment to the weak ones of our world...and this story is a story about God's forgiving love – that even one who schemes with his mom to steal his brother's

² Dawn, Marva. *In the Beginning, God*. 11.

birthright and blessing is one who, in the end, can still claim God's promises for himself.

Jacob was weak and he was something of a scoundrel, as today's story makes plain for us...yet, even after Jacob's less-than-exemplary behavior in today's story, God chooses to keep the promise made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham.

God could have looked at the deceitful way Rebekah and Jacob behaved, and God could have looked at Isaac and Esau's relative stupidity, and God could have said, "No way am I going to keep going with these characters...I think I better find me a new family to carry out my promise." God could have cut ties with Abraham's family right then and there. But God didn't.

And doesn't that speak volumes to us about God?

In an age where promises of all kinds are made and broken at the drop of a hat, isn't it incredibly good news to know that God keeps the promises God makes? And right there, isn't that a foundation worth staking your life on? Isn't that a God you want to say "yes" to? Isn't that a God you'd like to worship week after week, day after day...moment by moment?

Isn't that a God by whose promises you would like to be defined? Because, see, there is nothing in our culture today that makes promises like this...promises that do not later get changed or broken entirely.

I got my first iPhone three years ago – and, at the time, part of me was quite sure it was going to just revolutionize my life in the best ways possible. Seven months later, I dropped my precious iPhone in a tub of water and, by the way I worried about it, you would think the world had come to an end. My iPhone is just a *thing*...it doesn't define me. It doesn't bring me salvation.

In our heart of hearts, don't we know that things will never be truly life-changing for us? Don't we *know* that no product, no new technology, no change in our appearance will ever finally bring complete fulfillment – don't we know that? And even the *people* we love and trust most in our lives...even *they* can fail us sometimes, right? Our story from Genesis provides ample evidence of that truth, doesn't it?

Yet...yet there is grace and forgiveness. Yet there is One who makes promises that are eternal. There is One who is steadfast and there is One whose love is never-ending...and *that* One – the God who made it all – is the One who should define us...don't you think?

In this *Foundational Stories* series, we're meeting the folks who are toward the top our faith family tree...and these folks toward the top are not exactly the "perfect."

But, you see, these folks are only *toward* the top our faith family tree – they are not *at* the top. No...*at* the top of our faith family tree it's not Jacob, it's not Isaac and Rebekah, it's not Abraham and Sarah, it's not even Adam and Eve at the top of this family tree.

At the top of our faith family tree is the very God we have come here to worship today: the God who provides for us, the God who loves us steadfastly, the God who promises to shelter us in the storm, who promises to bless the world through us...and the God who keeps those promises even when we fail to keep ours.

The hymn we sang just before the sermon is one of my absolute favorites. In a world that can often beat us down with worry and fear and hopelessness – a world that causes us to wonder who we are sometimes – this hymn is such a gift.

I especially love the refrain that says, "Do not be afraid, I am with you; I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home. I love you and you are mine."

These may not be quite the words of the promise God made to Abraham – the promise that continued through Jacob and continues through Jesus – but it's the general idea, isn't it?

Those words remind us of the promise God made to Abraham thousands of years ago...a promise God makes to each of us every day, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done.

"Do not be afraid, I am with you; I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home. I love you and you are mine."

So...today and always, be secure in the knowledge that you belong to the Creator of the universe. Today and always, remember the promise of our God. Be defined by that promise. Be blessed by that promise. And, as you go forth today, make a *new* promise to offer blessing to this world God loves so much. May it be so. Amen.