

**The Danger of Favoritism**  
**Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 5:1-8**  
**7/13/08**

Begin sermon with people listing their favorite:

Restaurant...

Music...

Author...

Movie...

Teacher...

We have a lot of favorites in life – vacation, food, hobbies, clothes, TV show, number, color, clothes, and animals....what about children?

This morning's passage is about favoritism, selfishness, disloyalty and betrayal.

This passage is about children. Children are a blessing from the Lord. Sometimes we forget that! One Sunday in a Midwest city, a young child was "acting up" during the morning worship hour. The parents did their best to maintain some sense of order in the pew but were losing the battle. Finally, the father picked the little fellow up and walked sternly up the aisle on his way out. Just before reaching the safety of the foyer, the little one called loudly to the congregation, "Pray for me! Pray for me!"

The scripture verse tells the story of Isaac and Rebekah finally having a child to carry on the blessing the God given to Abraham. God's promise of blessing was passed to the next generation through children – Abraham to Isaac and now the next generation. However things got complicated when Isaac and Rebekah were expecting twins. These twins started their wrestling early. We are told the children struggled inside of her. The word struggled means squeezing or pushing against each other. Obviously Rebekah did not know what was going on inside of her. They did not have ultrasound in those days, so she prayed for an explanation. She did not expect what she got – an oracle – prophecy about the two boys inside of her. They each represent a nation that will be divided (against each other). One will be stronger than the other and the older will service the younger.

This is the story of Esau and Jacob. Their lives are surrounded with mystery. When it is time to give birth Esau came out first was named for the way he looked – reddish. Jacob came out gripping his brother's heel. He was named by what he was doing – supplants or heel grabber. These brothers were very different. Esau was a hunter and loved the outdoors. Jacob was not a man of weapons or hunting, but stayed close to home.

The story picks up when the boys are grown. They have probably been struggling against each other their whole lives. Esau comes in from the field very hungry. Jacob is cooking a stew. Esau asks for some stew. Jacob suggests a trade. Give me your birthright and I will give you some stew. Obviously their relationship is not very compassionate. The birthright is all the rights of the first born son. He got most of the father's possessions along with the carrying the

family name to the next generation. Esau's response is simply I am so hungry, a birthright is not important to me right now. And they work the deal.

I want to look at the characters in this story.

1. God is sort of a bystander. God gives the oracle which begins unravel the string of events. God tells Rebekah that there are two nations within you. They will be divided and fight against each other. There will be no peace between them. God does not explain or justify this oracle. God simply announces this is the plan. There is no explanation. All they can do is accept it. God announces a drastic change that will cause great conflict within the family. The older will serve the younger. In those days the oldest son was always favored and blessed more than the other children. He had natural rights. This was the rule of society – the norm that everyone followed. God is changing all that! God is changing the custom of the day without any explanation.

It almost seems that God is causing a great conflict by this oracle. It is a scandal. The writer of this story simply says God can do what God wants to do – God is free to do whatever – yes even counterdict human rules and procedures. The younger that has no rights in that society will have everything and the older will not have anything.

2. Esau is a hunter. He is used to hunting and eating with no waiting. He gets the food he wants. Maybe he lives in the moment. He can't see beyond his appetites. A future promise of privilege does not help him presently when he is starving.
3. Jacob is restless. His life began grabbing at his brothers heel. He seems to be always grabbing, insisting, and exploiting. Their almost seems to be a darkness working in Jacob that he is led to manipulate his brother. Later we find out he is willing to steal, lie and hurt anyone to get what he wants. His name means surplanter – to take the place of another through force, scheming or strategy. He lives up to his name!
4. Isaac and Rebekah play a very big role in this story. Did you notice that writer wanted to let us know that there was favoritism in this story. Isaac loved Esau because he lived his hunting but Rebekah loved Jacob. That is all that is said about the parents once the story begins. I wonder how the favoritism of the parents influenced the brothers. I bet Rebekah reminded Jacob that he would be the favored one who got all the inheritance. His brother would serve him. I can see Jacob repeating this to Esau. "I am better than you!" Esau goes to his Isaac who assures him that everything will be a right. What a confusing situation! I am sure their favoritism adds to the confusing conflicts of this story.

Several years ago I attended a youth conference for parents. A pastor read a paper called *The Musings of a good father on a bad day*. I want to read a few paragraphs.

*The poor childless couples get so selfish and wrapped up in their own concerns that you have to feel sorry for them. They don't fight over the child's discipline, they don't blame each other for the child's most nauseous characteristics, and they miss all the fun of doing without things for*

*the sake of the children. They go along in their own dull way doing what they want and liking each other. It's a pretty pathetic picture.*

*Everyone should have children. No one should be allowed to escape the wonderful experience attached to each stage in the development of the young. The happy memories of baby days, the alert nights, coughing spells, debts, diaper deliveries, "dispo" baby sitters, saturated mattresses, spilled food, tantrums, emergencies and never-ending crisis.*

*Then comes the real fulfillment as the child grows like a little acorn into a real nut. The wonder of watching your over-weight ballerina make a fool of herself in a leotard. The warm smile of the small lad with the sun glittering on five thousand bucks worth of braces ruined on peanut brittle. The rollicking, merry, carefree voices of hordes of hysterical kiddies stampeding at a birthday party.*

*The childless couple lives in a vacuum. They fill their lonely days with golf, vacations, dinner dates, civic affairs, tranquility, leisure and money. They contribute no addition to the human race, which is satisfaction within itself. There is a terrifying emptiness without children; and the childless couple is too comfortable to know it. You just have to look at them to see what the years have done. He looks boyish, unlined and rested. She is slim, well groomed and youthful. It isn't natural. If they had kids, they'd look like the rest of us—tired, gray, wrinkled and sagging— in other words normal!*

I wonder if there were countless arguments between the Isaac and Rebekah over their favoritism of the boys!

Who is God's favorite? Jacob or Esau? Isaac or Rebekah? You or me? God does not have favorites. God does some choosing most of which is way beyond our understanding.

(Meditation and Affirmation proclaim God's ways are unexplainable and beyond our understanding)

Everyone in this story seems to act as if they can resolve the issue of priority, right and favoritism. They all act as if it is all about them – their decisions and actions will only affect them and no one else. Do they pray for God's leadership and guidance? We don't know. Human need and human cleverness move the story along. As all this stealing, betrayal, lying, hating and cheating is happening on the surface, God's purposes are hidden.

There is a question I keep asking myself through this soap opera of a story. Will God allow Jacob to get away with it? Will God use Jacob's dishonest, hunger for power, scheming to fulfill the oracle? The answer is yes. A big YES!

God's grace and ways of working in the world and our lives sometimes seems like a scandal. God's grace does upset our organized lives. We do not understand the ways of God. You and I would not have allowed Jacob to get away with it!

God loves this family. God loves Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob even in their sin and favoritism. God has made promises to this family. God loves Jacob but does not justify his

actions. Jacob and his family will pay the consequences of his decisions. These decisions will lead to hatred and Esau planning his murder. Jacob's life is full of problems – people lie to him, betray him and his children break his heart.

God loves us in spite of ourselves. The Romans passage proclaims that God loves us in Jesus Christ. When we were going the opposite way of God, God sent Jesus into the world and into our lives to save us from ourselves. This is what baptism is all about. Starting today we will relocate the baptism font in a more centered position so we can see it every day of worship. When you walk in, you will be able to see the water. The water symbolizes God loving before we could ever love God back. God loved us in Jesus Christ before we were capable of loving. This is love that pursues us, comes to find us even in our dark, hidden places of life. This water proclaims that Jesus Christ loves us even when we are showing favoritism and trying to control our lives. God says in this water that even when we are making decisions not thinking about God or others but only ourselves, God loves us. God will actually use us in his plan, even when we are unsuccessfully trying to save ourselves and fix our problems. God draws straight lines with crooked sticks.