

Mom Always Loved You Best!
Genesis 25:19-34
July 13, 2008

Tommy and Dickie Smothers made the line famous, but siblings throughout history have felt the sentiment. “Mom always loved you best!” “Dad thinks you’re the greatest!”

Firstborn children like me have to “break in” our parents. We have to work hard for every break we get, like staying out late. We have to prove ourselves to our novice parents, for they tend to be very anxious with the first child. Later-borns have it far easier. By the time they come around, parents are worn down and worn out. They are far more relaxed.

My father still reminds me that I didn’t speak to him for days when he would not let me go with the high school youth group to a District Youth Event in Fallon, Nevada, just an hour away from our home in Sparks. His concern was that another high school student would be driving. Six years later when my youngest brother was in high school, he was allowed to drive a truck and trailer out to the lake an hour from home so he and his buddies could go jet-skiing. Not that I’m jealous or bitter; it’s just a fact of life: parents tend to relax with more experience!

In the case of Esau and Jacob, it seems that Esau is doomed from the beginning. Even in the womb these twin brothers are wrestling with one another. Their mother Rebekah is troubled by this difficult pregnancy. God declares that the tension within her womb is symbolic of the tension the brothers will experience in their life journeys. The older son will be physically stronger, but the younger will rule over his big brother. Poor Esau never has a chance. It’s one thing if your mom or dad likes your brother better, but if God likes your brother better, then you might as well go out and chill in the woods.

That’s exactly what Esau does. He is a skillful hunter, a man of the field. He goes out to exert his physical strength and prowess as a hunter. Jacob, the younger brother, is a homebody, preferring to stay inside playing computer games.

This is not the first instance in scripture in which God favors the young one. Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. God liked Abel’s offering of the fruit of the land better than the elder brother, Cain’s offering of meat. This partiality evokes strong feelings of rejection within Cain and in his pain, he kills his brother. Jacob’s two wives, Leah and Rachel, are sisters. Jacob will work for their father seven years for each wife. His preference is for Rachel, the youngest sister, but since the eldest daughter must marry first, Jacob must first take Leah in order to have the opportunity to marry Rachel. The jealousy and sibling rivalry continue to the next generation, for eleven of Jacob’s sons know that Joseph, the second to the youngest, the firstborn son of Rachel, is their father’s favorite son. His elder brothers try to get rid of Joseph, selling him into slavery.

It is important to understand the status of the firstborn in the Hebrew culture. We’ve heard in previous stories that parents long for a son to carry on the family name. The firstborn son is considered to be sacred and an exclusive possession of God. He is given a privileged position in the extended family and afforded certain rights that belong to no one else in the family. He will rise to leadership of the family and receive a double share of his father’s inheritance. Thus, there are power and economic incentives drawing Jacob to steal his brother’s birthright.

One way to understand God's favoritism is through the biblical motif of God's preference for the underdog. This theme is evident not only in this story and those already mentioned; it is also carried on in the ministry of Jesus, who reaches out to include sinners and outcasts in his circle of concern. Both God and Jesus seem to overturn conventional wisdom, disregarding cultural customs in favor of offering grace to the small fry. God often surprises us by choosing the least expected person to serve God's purposes. God typically inverts conventional wisdom by electing weaker instruments to fulfill God's mission.

I have experienced that in my own life. My personality type does not fit the typical profile of a pastor. When I was in the midst of seeking ordination by the church 23 years ago, I was nearly discontinued from the process. I wasn't the right type. God's grace must have been present and prevailed in spite of the stereotype, for here I am, having served local churches all those years. God often chooses the least likely to serve God's purposes.

A young boy named Guiseppe was called "good-for-nothing" by his Papa. Papa came from a long line of fisherman, and for Sicilian families, the sons were to follow in their father's occupation.

When he first came to America, Guiseppe's father worked on the railroad until he saved enough money to send for his family. They moved immediately to Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco so he could continue his family tradition—fishing.

There were nine children in the family, and all the boys were expected to help in the fishing business. But Guiseppe didn't want to participate. The rocking of the small boat and the smell of fish bothered him. Guiseppe tried, but he just could not adapt to the fishing business. He took odd jobs, returning all of his earnings to the family for food and clothing, but his father continued to call him lazy. Real work was helping his father on the fishing boat.

Guiseppe struggled to find something he enjoyed. Tennis stars Maurice McLaughlin and Bill Johnston were from San Francisco, and Guiseppe thought he wanted to be like them. But his passion for tennis was short-lived. Guiseppe was beginning to think he might *never* amount to anything.

As it turned out, Guiseppe was quite successful. We know him by his American name, "Joe." We know him as "the Yankee Clipper," Joe DiMaggio. Joe and two of his fisherman brothers became very good baseball players. Joe is in baseball's Hall of Fame. God had found a way to work with this "good-for-nothing" boy of a Sicilian fisherman.ⁱ

There may be occasions when we feel that God loves everyone else better than God loves me. With awareness of our limitations and weaknesses, we might begin to feel worthless and hopeless. The good news is that God elects people not for privilege, but for purpose. God chose a "nobody," Abram, a nomadic shepherd from Ur of the Chaldees with an infertile wife, and promised to make him "a great nation" and bless him, making his descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore. God chose Jacob, the deceiver, an unlikely choice, to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. If God can work through these patriarchs, then God can also work through us.

A clerk in a posh European hotel was one day greeted by a small man who asked for a room. But the man was so unimpressive in appearance that the young woman at the desk told him that there were no rooms available. Just then the hotel manager came out of his office, took one look at the man, and recognized him as Pierre Monteux, conductor of the San Francisco

Symphony, in Europe for a series of concerts. He quickly whispered this information to the desk clerk. She hurried back to the counter, apologized and said, “Why of course we can find you a room, Mr. Monteux! Why didn’t you tell me you were somebody?” Maestro Monteux picked up his bags and stalked out. As he did he looked over his shoulder and said, “Madame, everybody is somebody!”

Everybody is somebody worthy of service in the name of God. God can use even the least and unlikely, the farmer and the hunter, the firstborn and the last born and every child in between to further the mission and purpose of God. In the eyes of God, you and you and you and you and you are the best of all!

ⁱ Dan L. Flanagan, “Grabby and Hairy,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, June-July 2005, p. 56.

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