

*Focus on the Family*  
A Sermon by Angie Witmer  
Plymouth UCC  
Saturday and Sunday, July 12 and 13, 2008

I hadn't seen Steve Miller in ten years or so. It was great to catch up with him over lunch a few weeks ago when I was up in his neck of the woods. He hasn't changed much in ten years. Sure, he's a little more gray around the temples and has a few more laugh lines around his eyes but he still has a quirky sense of humor and an insane love of people and a dedication to God that I have always admired. He says that I haven't changed much in ten years but you know as well as I do that my hairstyle alone has changed at least ten times in the eight years I've been here. I'm pretty sure he was saying that just to be nice. Oh, well.

Our quick trip down memory lane was good for my soul. We told stories about the music we used to play together and reminisced about theatrical productions we orchestrated. We also remembered stories about church and how he is the one who is responsible for me standing in front of all you on days like today. Some of the stories we shared were hysterical, some poignant, some a little painful. All good, though. All good.

The reason I tell you all of this is because in the midst of that conversation I remembered a song that Steve wrote when his first child, Leah, was baptized. I still can't believe that was 18 years ago. Man. In any case, the song is about more than baptism. It's about our call to be sharing our stories, passing the word along from one to another. It goes something like this:

*One generation to the next generation, let us pass the word along.*

*Mothers and fathers teaching their children, let our faith grow bold and strong.*

Passing the word along. That's our job. From one generation to the next. From one person to another.

After my lunch with Steve, I was getting ready to officiate a wedding and had the TV on in the background. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught an ad for Purell hand sanitizer that ended by saying “imagine a touchable world.” OK. I’ll imagine. But while I do, I am going to try and forget the images that the commercial placed in my brain about how untouchable the world really is: disgusting public restrooms and gas stations and people hacking and coughing and germs everywhere. I was even more than a little grossed out by a dirty kid playing in the backyard with his big, slobbery golden retriever. Ewww...

To the company’s credit, the ad did say “the world is cleaner than you think.” I think that’s true. But then they had to go and tack on “imagine a touchable world.” And that pushed my button.

I have news for the good folks at Purell: we don’t have to imagine a touchable world. We already have one, right here. It may not be 99.99% sanitary but it is most certainly touchable. And personally, I would much rather live in a world where I’m happy to see kids playing in the dirt and roughhousing in the yard with their dog and in a world where I have anxiety attacks every time I need to pump some gas.

I don’t mean to pick solely on the Purell people today. Their ads are actually quite tame in comparison to some others. But it does seem that the marketing trend these days is to make us feel insecure and afraid so that we will buy their product in order to feel safe and secure once more. Fear and anxiety are the words of the advertising world.

They aren’t our words, though. Our word is the word of God: a word of hope and faith and grace and peace. Our word is a word of justice and kindness and humbleness. And our job is to not just passively give this word lip service once a week for an hour or so but to actively embody the word in all that we say and do. It’s not a small task. But it is a critical one. The most important thing we can do, actually.

This summer, we’ve been focusing on our family of faith for some guidance on how we might live lives that embody God’s word. A month or so ago, we laughed with Abraham

and Sarah when they discovered that God had chosen them to be the mother and father to generations of faithful people. A week or so later, we cringed and cried with Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael as the story continued with fits of jealousy and rage, broken promises and broken dreams and broken homes and broken lives. It wasn't pretty.

Soon after, we cheered when Isaac was finally born into the world after years and years and years of waiting—and then we gasped in horror when Abraham came “this close” to taking his beloved child's life. As we continued through our faith family's saga, we grieved over Sarah's death and celebrated when a new chapter of life began with Isaac and Rebekah's marriage.

Through all of these stories shared here the past few weeks and months, one thing has been made abundantly clear: a life of faith is rarely simple, easy, neat or clean. It certainly isn't predictable. And it is rarely what you think it's going to be.

That's how the word continues in today's story: after trying for 20 years to live out the promise and bear children in order to continue the lineage promised to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah discover that they are pregnant. With twins. Twins who, according to the ancient stories, are at odds with one another from the moment of conception. They fight so hard in Rebekah's womb that she is moved to utter one of my all-time favorite Biblical quotes: If it's going to be this hard, why even bother?

In due time, though, the boys are born. Esau first: Esau, the red one. Esau, the hunter. Esau, the fighter. Esau, Isaac's favorite. And then comes Jacob: Jacob, hanging onto Esau's heel. Jacob who will inherit the blessing. Jacob, the thoughtful one. Jacob, Rebekah's favorite.

The setup of this story gives a hint of the juicy stories yet to come—and they are coming. In the next few weeks, we'll hear more stories about favorite sons and favorite wives and brothers who lie and cheat and even try to kill one another. You'll have to wait for those, though. Today we are here at the start of Jacob and Esau's tale and find that they are all

boy: they poke at each other, taunt each other, demand things from one another, act up and act out. At the end of this section, Esau wanders into the house after a hard day of doing whatever it is that he does outside and yells to his brother: “I’m dying here! Get me something to eat! Now!”

OK—here’s a side note. I doubt that Esau was dying. Melodrama and kids go hand in hand. I can’t tell you how many times I have seen my own beautiful daughter roll her eyes as she loudly groans, “I will just DIE if you leave the house looking like that!” Although I am sure that there are times that the embarrassment of having me for a mother is too much to bear; however, she has lived through it all so far.

It’s the same with Esau. He may be hungry. He may be feeling all puffed up because he has such an important job out in the ‘real world’ but he isn’t going to die if he doesn’t get a bowl of soup within seconds of arriving back at home. He doesn’t impress me with his bravado and self-important attitude.

On the other hand, Jacob doesn’t impress me much here, either. You’d think that that one chosen to carry on God’s blessing to the rest of the world would be a little more compassionate and loving, a little more of a model on how to live a Godly life. But he’s not. Jacob takes full advantage of his brother’s situation and manages to weasel the family birthright out from under Esau’s nose. For a bowl of soup. Bean soup, to boot. The family birthright—we’re not just talking cash dollars here but prestige and power and the seat at the head of the table and standing in the community. A birthright meant something to those folks. And Jacob stole it.

That is so not the way God wants us to treat each other. But he did.

One generation to the next generation, let us pass the word along.

Here’s a question for you: Why pass this word along? Do we really need to know that Isaac and Rebekah have favorite children? Shouldn’t they, as saints of our faith family,

be above having favorites? Or at least if they have favorites, shouldn't they hide that fact from the rest of us? And what about Rebekah—what kind of role model is she, complaining about a little wrestling in her womb? One of these children has been chosen to carry on God's blessing to the world—shouldn't she just suck it up? Don't you think it's a little embarrassing that we know that Jacob got a leg up in life by trickery and deceit? Shouldn't he, as the future leader of all of the tribes of Israel, have a little more integrity? And wouldn't we, as responsible keepers of the faith, be better off if we lifted up stories of role models who might show us a better way to live?

Some folks think that the stories we tell here in worship need to be encouraging and inspirational, upbeat and make us feel good. Some would even go to far as to say that we should be sanitizing the stories of our faith, believing that we need to focus only on the positive and get rid of (or at least not mention) those parts of our story that are uncomfortable, seedy, and a little unseemly.

To a point, I agree. We are, after all, created in God's image. And that is good. Actually, God calls it "very good" in Genesis 1. After Genesis, 1, though, things go south in a hurry as far as humans are concerned and we start acting pretty un-God like. To forget all of that—to shove these stories under the rug and not mention them in public places—would be to ignore a huge part of who we are. To rid ourselves of all of the horrible, painful, icky things we have done in our distant (and in our not-so-distant) past would make this whole story lose credibility as then it would only be partly true. When we only tell the feel-good, happy, partial truths of our story, then the unspoken word that we are passing along from one generation to the next is that you can only partly be yourself—the good part, that is. The focus of life, from that point of view, is all about being happy and successful because that's the kind of people God wants: happy, successful people. Right? Well...not so much.

Every time I heard these stories, I thank God that they haven't been sanitized and pasteurized and homogenized to 99.99% purity. I am grateful that the focus of our family stories covers the whole spectrum of life because this story and this places isn't just for

people who are happy and successful (whatever that means). This is for all of us, no matter who we are or where we are from or what we have done up to now. I am delighted to know that I am one in a long line of people who have messed things up so badly that it seems nothing good can come out of the mistakes we've made—the story tells us the God does some of the coolest things out of the most disastrous of situations. That is comforting to me, anyway. I am tickled pink that my great heroes of faith doubted and swore and deliberately did what they weren't supposed to do—but that didn't keep them from being great keepers of the faith and from passing that faith on to others. I am humbled to know that even though these incredible men and women hit the mark on more than one occasion, they more often than not missed it by a mile. Hearing about the big mistakes they made helps me get out of bed on days when, like Rebekah, I wonder “why bother?” I am often brought to my knees and brought to tears when I realize that God not only loved these people and worked with them and hung in there with them and forgave them and passed the blessing on to us through them—God still does it today. God loves us. Forgives us. Blesses us. Works in and through us. No matter what.

From one generation to the next, may this be the word that we pass along.

Amen.