

“Chips Off the Old Block”

Garrison Keillor is the homey storyteller on Public Radio who regales us with tales from Lake Wobegon, an imaginary Minnesota hamlet that offers us telling glimpses of what life is like in small towns of every size. Many years ago he told a story about Memorial Day. The town fathers (the mothers had better sense) were planning the annual celebration at the cemetery, and a dispute arose regarding who among them would be most worthy to deliver the Memorial Day Address. Each of the puffed up patriarchs of the town thought himself best qualified for this sacred and solemn responsibility, largely because each thought himself to represent the most distinguished family heritage. So they decided to ask the town librarian to research the respective families to see whose history best exemplified the virtues to be extolled: courage, sacrifice, integrity, patriotism. It turned out that they were all descended from jailbirds, draft dodgers and horse thieves. So they decided to hold a moment of silence, have a Boy Scout play taps, recite the Pledge of Allegiance and go home.

I think of this today because we’ve been working our way through Genesis this summer; and as we get deep into some of these stories from the distant past, things can get a bit uncomfortable. When people of piety solemnly intone the need to restore solid, biblical family values, I get the idea that they don’t actually read this book very much. A lot of what we find here, rather than making us swell with pride, should make us at least squirm a bit—with recognition if nothing else.

When it comes to spiritual ancestors of questionable character, Jacob has to be the prince of them all. “Weasel” might be a gentle descriptor for him. As the younger of twin sons, Jacob has been wrestling with his brother Esau since they shared a womb. When they are born he is clinging to his older brother’s ankle. Esau, the firstborn, stood to inherit everything. But Jacob, with some help from his mother Rebekah, goes to work on his brother. First he gets him to trade his birthright for a bowl of stew—admittedly not a good choice, even if it was really good stew. Then he dresses up in Esau’s clothing and pastes on some goat hair to steal the firstborn’s blessing from their blind and dying father, lying through his teeth about who he is. Touching, isn’t it? Bare-knuckled sibling rivalry, deceit, impulsive disdain for the inheritance, parental favoritism on the one side and inattentiveness on the other: family values at their finest! But we’re just getting started.

When Esau discovers that Jacob has stolen the blessing from their father he becomes homicidal with rage. Their mother learns that Esau plans to kill Jacob. So she warns him to flee back to her ancestral home of Haran, where her brother, Jacob’s dear old Uncle Laban—and this guy is a real piece of work—stands to welcome his nephew with open arms... sure he does.

The initial meeting goes well enough.¹ In full-fledged flight from his fratricidal brother Esau, Jacob comes upon a well. There are three flocks of sheep around it, but the well is covered by a huge stone because water is the most precious commodity in that part of the world and the folks who have a claim on this well have made a deal that none of the flocks will be watered unless all are present. To seal the deal they have sealed the well with a huge stone that presumably takes all the shepherds working together to move it.

So while those present are waiting for the rest to arrive, Jacob begins to make inquiries regarding Uncle Laban. Do you know him? How's he doing? They reply that, "Sure we know him. In fact, that's his daughter, Rachel." Jacob looks at Rachel. Then he looks at the sizable flock of sheep belonging to his Uncle Laban. Then he looks at Rachel. Then he looks at the sheep. Then he decides that he is in love. And in a fit of macho might he rolls aside the stone, all by himself. Never mind the agreements these people live with! You never get another opportunity to make a first impression!

Laban gets word of his nephew's impressive arrival and social debut. He runs to meet him, embraces and kisses him, welcomes him into the family group. "Surely you are my bone and flesh!" Laban declares. If Jacob were alert this would make him uneasy: it takes one to know one; but, so far so good.

Jacob joins the Laban family sheep business, and after a month or so his uncle slyly comes to him and says, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Jacob has an idea. Laban has two daughters. Leah is the elder and Rachel, with whom Jacob is smitten, is the younger. Jacob proposes—or at least he offers a business proposition—"I will serve you for seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Done. Jacob is so much in love that the seven years fly by for him, so eager is he for the prospect of marital bliss with the woman of his dreams.

The time is completed and the wedding feast celebrated. But when the morning after dawns, Jacob discovers that Rachel just isn't the girl he married. In fact he wakes up with Leah, something accomplished no doubt through the agency of a lot of veils and a lot of wine. Now the translations differ here, but in at least one reading it says that Leah had "dull eyes." Whatever the case, she and not Rachel is now Jacob's wife.

If we've been paying attention we have to acknowledge a rough justice here. Jacob had swindled his brother out of the birthright and pulled his own case of mistaken identity to steal the blessing of the firstborn; now Uncle Laban has pulled a fast one on him. What goes around comes around; but Jacob is furious. Laban's response to his anger is hilarious: "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn." Oh! Didn't we tell you about the local customs? Sorry!

But Laban has another deal to offer: play out the week of celebration due a new bride—give the dull-eyed her due; then Jacob can marry Rachel, as well. And then he can work another seven years to compensate Laban for the second daughter. Notice that

¹ Interestingly, the account contains echoes of the story from three weeks ago when a servant of Isaac made the same journey in search of a bride for his master. In both stories the watering hole is the meeting place, and the result is more or less love at first sight. See Genesis 24.

Laban is shrewd enough to allow the second marriage immediately, rather than providing seven years for Jacob's ardor to abate. Laban throws in a maid to go with each of his daughters. (With this sort of patriarchy, it's no wonder things get so messed-up.)

So Jacob has reaped what he has sown. But of course the story doesn't just stop there. Jacob is married to two women whose rivalry with one another is a match for Jacob's rivalry with Esau. And Jacob is indentured to a relative he doesn't trust. He loves one of his wives and is indifferent to the other. It's a real recipe for domestic bliss, all right. What could be better?

Actually, it gets better. God intervenes on behalf of Leah, the unloved wife, and makes her into a fertility machine, while Rachel remains childless. By the time it's all done, Jacob will have thirteen offspring: first, four sons by Leah; then two more sons by Rachel's maid, Bilhah; then two more sons by Leah's maid, Zilpah; then two more sons and a daughter by Leah again, who tops out at seven. Then, at long last, Rachel gives birth to Joseph, and finally to Benjamin. And of course they all live and travel together, like a family reunion that never ends. Lots of family adventures lie ahead, like Jacob exacting revenge on Uncle Laban, an encounter with Esau, and Joseph's eleven brothers selling him into slavery because he was the favorite son of the favorite wife with the coat of many colors. But these are tales for another day.

The people who pass along these stories, of course, are most interested in providing an account of where their ancestors came from. The twelve sons of Jacob give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel, and the story carries connotations of the family pecking order still being worked out centuries later. These stories didn't get written down for about three hundred years; so we should take some of it with a grain of salt.

But what intrigues me is all the airing of dirty laundry. Who would want to be downwind of that clothesline? And remember what is at stake here: Jacob, by hook or by crook—actually a little bit of each—has become the bearer of the promise God made to Abraham. That promise was threefold: that Abraham would have many descendants (at this point that's looking pretty good, considering that Ishmael, operating on another branch of the family tree, and Esau are also reproducing like crazy); that Abraham's many descendants they would inherit a promised land; and that through them all the families of earth would come to know God and so be blessed.

Let's set aside for a moment the issue of the land. What is remarkable about this story is the assertion that through these weirdly dysfunctional family shenanigans some holy purpose is being advanced. Jacob and his clan are somehow the bearers of a holy truth—maybe not exclusively, but significantly. It is through them that the whole Judeo-Christian story unfolds. Yet in telling their story we do not get the sanitized version. This does not read, for example, like most local church histories that recount how fine, courageous, upstanding people came to this or that place because they loved freedom and they loved God, and here holiness took root in its purest form and issued in God's great gift to the world of... us!

Certainly there are exemplary people of virtue in our past. But the truth is that people haven't changed very much; and most of us are pretty much a mixed bag even on our good days. And even if we have more good days than bad, we can still recognize

ourselves and our relations in these stories from Genesis: wheeling and dealing and making it up as we go along; heading down this blind alley or that one and ending up in places we never could have imagined.

The upshot of it is that when we're telling the truth in church about who we are and where we come from, we all ought to be able to feel right at home. When we say, "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are always welcome here," we mean it. And we mean it particularly for folks who are thinking to themselves, "You don't really want to know the places I've been." The truth is that the pews have always been populated by folks who've been around the block more than they might like to let on.

So those of us ready to volunteer to give the Memorial Day Address at the cemetery had probably better think again. And those of us who think we're the only ones who feel as though we're imposters, as though everybody else is righteous around here and we're the only ones carrying secrets around... well, we'd probably better think again, too. The book tells us that, when you come right down to it, we're all just chips off the old block. God isn't for the pious and the perfect, but for all of us.

Each week is another family reunion. Pass the potato salad.

Amen

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