

“Jacob and Esau”

The Rev Drew Willard
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Gen. 25:19-34

Matt. 12:22-30

[Jesus said,]

‘Whoever is not with me is against me,
and whoever does not gather with me scatters.’

Matt. 12:30

Let us pray... O God,
Teach us how to be faithful Christians as we engage in dialogue
with people of other faiths and people of no faith.
May we be true to ourselves as we seek to help others do the same.

Amen

There are many entry points for experiencing the United Church of Christ
at General Synod.

It is part liturgical event, part business meeting, part culture fair,
and part homecoming for some of us.

It is a chance to get immersed in UCC-specific community,
for lay people and clergy alike.

Proposed resolutions came up for vote towards the end of the scheduled events
and I was very pleased about the results.

True to our history as a church committed to being involved in the world –
and often challenging the world on social issues, our delegates voted
to urge ratification of the nuclear test ban treaty,
to actively counter hostility against Muslims,
to uphold international standards of human rights
for gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and
to establish a theological forum.

The biggest decision for the delegates was accepting the proposal
for substantial changes to the UCC’s constitution and bylaws
that would reorganize our national structure.

The goal is to unify our church’s ‘governance’,
paring it down from a 300 plus board to 52 members.

The main concern within our denomination was about adequate representation
for the various interest groups within our churches.

The proposal was passed and depends upon confirmation by
each of the conferences before the next General Synod in 2013.

But that was not the biggest controversy – at least as far as other
Christian denominations, especially conservatives are concerned.

Willard, p.2

In the language included in those changes to the constitution,
reference to God as 'Father' was dropped and replaced with
'triune' God.

The specific line change reads as follows:

Lines 80 to 85: *ARTICLE V. LOCAL CHURCHES*

*The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ
is the Local Church.*

*A Local Church is composed of persons who,
believing in [the triune] God as heavenly Father, and
accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,
and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
are organized for Christian worship,
for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and
for the ongoing work of Christian witness.*

One pastor wanted to take it even further and drop the word 'triune',
as well as the reference to Jesus and the Holy Spirit,
with the word 'God' as being a sufficient term by itself.

The 28th General Synod of the United Church of Christ was beginning
to look like the First Council of Nicaea – a step back to the 4th Century!
But – in my opinion, it was fortunate to have this discussion and
that ultimately, the delegates did reject this amendment and
kept the proposed reference to our 'triune' God,
which brings us to today's lessons...

For the rest of July, each Sunday we'll take a closer look
at the story of Jacob and Esau and what they have to teach us.
Esau was bigger and stronger than his younger brother
and was his father's favorite as the firstborn who'd inherit everything.
But Jacob was favored by his mother and –
considering how things would turn out for him, he had God's favor, too.

However, not since Cain and Abel has there been a more
dysfunctional pair of brothers in competition with each other.
And their sibling rivalry is a metaphor for the broken relationships
between the people of God throughout history.
We see this tragic dynamic still at work between Christians and Christians,
between Christian and Jewish people and
between both of them and Muslim people.
Jacob versus Esau, déjà vu – all over again.

Willard, p.3

We are living in a time of change and transformation –
much of it is scary, but there's a lot of good going on, too.
For one thing, there is new thinking among Christians
about our religious beliefs that we've taken for granted
concerning the nature of God.
And the conversation is not just among scholars
nor do conservatives dominate the conversation.

Discussions about ancient books banned from our Bible
like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary
have given new insights about the early Christians –
and that they were not all in agreement,
but had creative and diverse opinions about Jesus.
The book, The DaVinci Code, brought these questions into the mainstream
allowing for a more candid discussion about Jesus' humanity & divinity.

But sometimes, this movement appears to be in too big a rush
to de-mythologize the Son of God and relativize the Son of Man.
And we can find ourselves alone and vulnerable – asking,
“By what authority can we challenge the evil spirits of our time?”

There was a lot of confusion in antiquity as the Hebrew people
struggled to establish themselves in the land of Canaan
where Abraham first settled.
And they struggled to define their beliefs in the one God
whom they called the LORD.
For this put them in direct competition with the people already there
who had another god they called Baal –
a word that also meant 'Lord'.

A variation was 'Baal-zebul' – 'Princely Lord' or as my OT professor said,
'The Lord of Life', though the Israelites of Elijah's time mocked this god
as 'Baal-zebul' – 'The Lord of The Flies'.

By Jesus' day, that name became associated with the devil.
Jesus was furious to be falsely accused of evil motives,
he was indignant out of his strong identification
with God's Holy Spirit.

Still, he told his accusers that even if they only looked at his deeds
they would see the power structures of evil were being dismantled.
People who were blind before, were gaining insight and
people who had been pushed to the margins, were finding their voice.

Willard, p.4

And so it is demonstrated in the Bible stories about him that
Jesus prevails time and time again against Satan –
a name that is de-mythologized to mean ‘Enemy’.

*How would Satan cast itself out? Like a throne divided, would it not collapse?
Like a house divided, would it not fall down?
Thus, Satan divided will end with a crash.
But no one enters a bully’s house, his goods to take –
Yet first, this bully bound Christ will make,
and then the goods go free –And is it not for their sake?*

The ‘strong man’ represents the social structures of repression and abuse.
The ‘goods’ are you and I or anyone when we find ourselves
struggling in life.

And the one who is stronger than the ‘strong man’ is Jesus – The One who is
the Holy Spirit of God’s love and justice, in the flesh.

We as a congregation are in this fight
to affirm the reality of God while unpacking the meaning
of labels we have received from our tradition about God.
I want to reassure you that the United Church of Christ is still "Christian".
And we really do believe God is still speaking –
and that’s not just a cute bumper sticker catchphrase for us.

God is challenging us to reinterpret the Trinity and the Gospel
for a pluralistic, post-modern world.
It is Christianity's unique contribution to interfaith discourse –
not as a triumphal "we're right and you're wrong",
but as a mystery that we proclaim as true
though it cannot be proven, except by deeds..

When our church hosted the participation of a rabbi and an imam
in our service two Sundays ago, we sang the Gloria and the Doxology –
yet provided an opportunity for our Jewish and Muslim guests to
praise God according to the mystery of their traditions.
We made room for them as our honored guests and
broadened our experience of God through them in the process.
There is indeed one God, but as siblings we must understand that
we are all like those proverbial blind men trying to describe an elephant.
It's just like Jesus said to those he healed,
“Go your way. Your faith has made you well.”
Amen

*Our Jewish Testament lesson today comes from Genesis 25:19-34
and introduces us to one of the Bible's more unlikely heroes – Jacob.
He is the fraternal twin of Esau and their story together is about the human
condition as it is complicated by sibling rivalry.*

- 19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son:
Abraham was the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old
when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel
the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.
- 21 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren;
and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.
- 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said,
'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'
- So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her,
'Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.'
- 24 When her time to give birth was at hand,
there were twins in her womb.
- 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle;
so they named him Esau.
- 26 Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel;
so he was named Jacob.
- Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.
- 27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field,
while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.
- 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game;
but Rebekah loved Jacob.
- 29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field,
and he was famished.
- 30 Esau said to Jacob,
'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!'
(Therefore he was called Edom.)
- 31 Jacob said,
'First sell me your birthright.'
- 32 Esau said,
'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?'
- 33 Jacob said,
'Swear to me first.'
- So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.
- 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank,
and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Matt. 12:22- 30

22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute;
and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute
could speak and see.

23 All the crowds were amazed and said,
'Can this be the Son of David?'

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said,
'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons,
that this fellow casts out the demons.'

25 He knew what they were thinking and said to them,
'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste,
and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself;
how then will his kingdom stand?

27 If I cast out demons by Beelzebul,
by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?
Therefore they will be your judges.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons,
then the kingdom of God has come to you.

29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property,
without first tying up the strong man?

Then indeed the house can be plundered.

30 Whoever is not with me is against me,
and whoever does not gather with me scatters.