

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Genesis 25:19-34

**SERMON SERIES:** Learning from the Life of Jacob

**SERMON TITLE:** When Grace Meets Dysfunction

This morning we begin a four-part sermon series entitled: *Learning from the Life of Jacob*. We begin this twisted family tale at the beginning: **Genesis 25:19-34**. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

According to Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary, the word *dysfunction* means: ***abnormal or unhealthy interpersonal behavior or interaction within a group***. By this definition, I suppose that there is some measure of dysfunction in every family. We are human beings after all. Notions of the "perfect" family reside somewhere within that part of the brain that produces imagination and fantasy, and yet we do have a sense of what normal and healthy relationships look like within a family.

And whatever normal and healthy relationships look like within a family, Jacob's family is not even close! Talk about dysfunction! The story of Jacob and his family is marked by parental favoritism, cheating, stealing, deception, trickery and dishonesty.

And the dysfunction didn't begin with Jacob's immediate family. It goes back at least to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham. Abraham fathered at least 8 children by 3 women. There was Ishmael whose mother was the Egyptian slave Hagar; there was Isaac whose mother was Abraham's wife Sarah; and then there were six other sons born to a woman Abraham married after Sarah died. Now even though Ishmael was Abraham's first born, Abraham cut Ishmael and Hagar off from the family by sending them away with nothing but bread and a skin of water to wander in the wilderness of Beersheba.

And then, according to Genesis 25:5, ***Abraham gave all he had to Isaac***. As for the remaining sons, Abraham gave them gifts and sent them away from Isaac. When we add all of

this up, *Abraham actively disinherited seven of his eight sons and their families, and then disowned them as if they might “contaminate” the others.*<sup>1</sup> Talk about dysfunction!

This brings us then to the infertile couple, Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac prayed for an end to his wife’s barrenness. And God answered his prayer with twins: Esau, the first born, and Jacob.

But even in the womb there was conflict between these two: *The children struggled together within her.* And bless her heart, Rebekah, this woman who had been unable to conceive for some twenty years, then said: *If it is to be this way, why do I live?* And finally, when these two were born, Jacob was holding onto his older brother’s heel.

Now from the very start, these two twin brothers were different. Esau was born rough and ready, a hairy boy who grew up to be a rugged hunter. Jacob, on the other hand, *was a quiet man, living in tents—a home body*, if you will. He’s the one we find cooking a stew as Esau—this great outdoorsman—comes in from the fields. And what does Jacob do? He cons his brother out of his birthright—and Esau is foolish enough to go along with the deal!

To make matters worse, Isaac and Rebekah played favorites: Abraham favored Esau while Rebekah doted on Jacob. Talk about dysfunction!

But here’s the amazing thing: In the midst of this twisted, dysfunctional family system, God was at work. And God was at work in some rather unconventional ways. For example, God chose Jacob as the child of promise even though Esau, as the first born, should have had the higher place according to the social customs of the day. God said to Rebekah: *the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.*

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<sup>1</sup> Clendenin, Dan. "The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself." [Journeywithjesus.Net](http://journeywithjesus.net). 10 July 2008 <<http://journeywithjesus.net>>.

Why did God make this unexpected choice? We're not told. We're simply left to conclude that it was a matter of grace—God's unearned, undeserved, unmerited love at work—in a scandalous sort of way.

But this shouldn't surprise us. Jesus was an unexpected choice. Who would have figured that a carpenter's son from Nazareth born in a Bethlehem stable would be God's chosen Messiah? The cross was an unexpected choice. Peter said to Jesus: *God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.* Even God's choice of us was unexpected by the world's standards: *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

Do you see what this means? No matter how dysfunctional our families may be or how messed up our lives may become—God is always at work to bring something good out of the mess! We can't earn this favor and we certainly haven't done anything to deserve this blessing—that's why we call this extraordinary gift of love, grace.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine. We'll call him Jack. Jack was a member of a church I once served. Jack was an alcoholic. Jack's father was an alcoholic. As you can imagine, the family in which Jack was raised was extraordinarily dysfunctional. There was deceit, cheating, trickery, dishonesty and a host of other behaviors that we've come to associate with family systems in which alcohol abuse is found. Not surprisingly, many of these same traits were found in Jack's own immediate family which included his wife and one son.

One more interesting fact: Jack had been raised in the Roman Catholic Church and he told me that as a young man he had felt called into the priesthood—a call that he ignored.

At the instigation of Jack's wife, an intervention was arranged to confront Jack with the painful dysfunction caused by his alcoholism. I participated in this intervention and shared with Jack what I had observed of his alcoholic behavior.

Thankfully, the intervention worked and Jack entered a rehab hospital to get sober and to undergo treatment. He got sober and was released from rehab, but when he returned to his family—his wife simply could not break free from the old, dysfunctional patterns of the past—so they ended up getting divorced.

But Jack stayed sober and his life began to change. He remarried. I was his best man, in fact. And not long after his marriage, he revisited that call to ministry that he had ignored in his earlier years.

Well, by the grace of God, my friend Jack became a licensed local pastor in The United Methodist Church. He served several churches, he finished his college degree, he attended seminary, he took a position as a hospital chaplain and several years ago I was honored to lay hands on my friend as he was ordained an elder in The United Methodist Church by Bishop Joel Martinez. He now uses the pain and dysfunction of the past, to help him minister to people in the present.

My brothers and sisters, this is what can happen when grace meets dysfunction. It happened to Jacob and his family, and it can happen to us. No matter how dysfunctional our families may be or how messed up our lives may become, God is always at work to bring something good out of the mess. Thanks be to God.