

Lost and Found Blessings
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Sibling rivalry is an issue that most families have faced on some level, whether it's dealing with our own siblings or watching our children argue or even observing our parents' siblings who may still have a hard time getting along. The basic definition of sibling rivalry is the jealousy, competition, or fighting between brothers and sisters. It can be incredibly frustrating to deal with, and it's often caused by each child trying to define who they are as an individual. That child wants to separate themselves from their siblings as they try to discover and develop their own talents and explore their own interests. Competition, fighting, and jealousy can ensue as siblings begin this process of self-definition.[1]

One of the ministers of my home church once related that when his children would fight, their "punishment" was to sit on the couch together for ten minutes and hold hands. Even though it might have been a fight about self-definition at the expense of the other and trying to figure out who you are and what you're about, he forced them to come together. He wanted them to get over themselves and whatever they'd been arguing about, and to do it side by side and hand in hand.

Sibling rivalry seems to fascinate us as a culture—think about sports examples alone like Venus and Serena Williams or Eli and Payton Manning. Last year John Harbaugh the head coach of the Ravens and Jim Harbaugh the head coach of the 49ers, brothers who are only separated by 15 months, made national headlines when their teams went head to head in the Super Bowl. John Harbaugh's Ravens won that game, and when he was later interviewed, he said that he had mixed emotions, relating, "I feel good for Baltimore. I feel great for the city, the fans, our players, our coaches—everybody did such a great job. It's a great accomplishment, but at the same time, when you're talking about your brother, your blood, your family, you're going to feel that, too." [2]

In order for siblings to compete and yet love and respect one another, like the Harbaugh brothers, parents may have to contend with sibling rivalry early on. The number one piece of advice for parents according to the University of Michigan website I was reading on Child Development (and speaking of rivalries, for those of you who know what a big Ohio State fan I am, I hope you appreciate the lengths I went to this week to find this crucial information...) Anyway, the number one piece of advice was: don't play favorites. No matter what, do not play favorites with your children.

The authors advised that you should enjoy each of your children's individual talents, set your kids up to cooperate and not compete, and try not to compare your children. Bottom line, let each child be who they are and celebrate your children's differences.[3] Perhaps this advice seems like common sense, but considering how common sibling rivalries are in most families, it's probably worth noting.

When you think about it, today's story from Genesis is a classic case of sibling rivalry and questionable parenting. We learn that Jacob deceives Isaac, his elderly father, in order to take away his brother Esau's blessing. And Rebekah, Esau and Jacob's mother, helped with the deception! The family drama begins with a prophecy at the birth of these twins. God says to Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." [4] As the youngest child in my family, I do sort-of love this prophecy. But we also learn from Genesis that "Esau was a skilled hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob." [5] Not only do we have a prophecy

about sibling rivalry, we also have parents playing favorites based on their children's personalities and talents.

Naturally, the story ends with a heartbroken Esau, cheated out of his blessing by his own twin brother. Esau cries, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!"[6] Esau is a burly sportsman and is weeping at the side of his frail, bed-ridden father, begging his dad to bless him too. Knowing that Esau is Isaac's favorite, we would expect Isaac to do everything he could to bless him, right? Isaac asks, "What then can I do for you, my son?" and then lamely "blesses him" in an offhanded way.[7]

What's interesting though is that Jacob, the smooth talking deceiver, will become one of the fathers of the faith. We hear the ancestors of the Jewish faith referred to all the time as the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Jacob, Jacob, Jacob—what about Esau? You can trace the descendents of Esau in the Bible, they do make cameos every now and then but Esau's descendents, the Edomites, remain outsiders. In the end, this story is a tale of sibling rivalry, parents playing favorites, and crazy family dynamics that will last generations (and on a historical level helped to explain the relationship Israel had with one of their neighbors.) At its heart though, this story is about a stolen blessing, and what's interesting is that even if Esau's blessing is not what it should have been, he still gets one. Isaac does bless his oldest son.

A couple of months ago, Mary Luti wrote a great devotional for our United Church of Christ about family blessings. She related that as she was walking along the streets of Seville, Spain she saw a tender family scene. It was time for the family—grandfather, father, and sons to go to their respective homes and as the father was rounding up his kids he turned to his father, and bowed his head a bit. The older man placed his hand on his son's head and said (in Spanish obviously, but Mary translated), "God bless you, my dear son." And with that simple gesture, the family parted ways for the night.

Blessing one's children was once a common practice in Spain. Mary goes on to say, "A friend's mother blessed all nine children every morning as they left for school. My friend, the youngest, was last in line. Impatient, she'd try to escape, but she got a blessing whether she wanted it or not. Her mother died when she was sixteen. She's sixty now. She's almost forgotten her mother's face, but not the weight of her hand, the feel of her blessing. It floods her with peace." [8]

There's a reason why we have our service of blessing here at Pilgrim every year, whether it's water from all over the world combined together and blessed, backpacks that the children of our church carry to school every day blessed, or bicycles and bike riders we see zooming around town blessed, there is something special and holy about the communal act of blessing. We see the devastation caused by a lost blessing and general family drama today in Genesis, imagine how different that story would be had Esau and Jacob both received a blessing from their father Isaac on equal standing.

And isn't this the blessed assurance we have when we gather here every Sunday to worship God together? That God loves us equally, that no one gets to claim that God loves them more, that God doesn't play favorites, or maybe that we are all God's favorites? That God's blessings abound in our lives if we would only pay attention and acknowledge them? That we have the agency to be blessings to one another by performing outward and visible signs of God's love?

Or as Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas Morrison once wrote, "Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only the Lord allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family, and frees us to pay careful attention to each other." [9] Paying careful attention to one another is blessing each other in a way, coming together as a

church family united in our service to God is how we can go forth and bless the world. May we be blessings to the world and to one another this day and all days. Amen.

[1] Kyla Boyse, "Sibling Rivalry," October 2011, <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/sibriv.htm>

[2] Scott Stump, "Super Bowl Coach has 'mixed emotions' about win over brother," Today News, February 4, 2013, <http://www.today.com/news/super-bowl-coach-has-mixed-emotions-about-win-over-brother-1B8233814>

[3] Kyla Boyse, "Sibling Rivalry," October 2011, <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/sibriv.htm>

[4] Genesis 25:23.

[5] Genesis 25: 27-28.

[6] Genesis 27:38.

[7] Genesis 27:37.

[8] J. Mary Luti, "God Bless You," UCC Still Speaking Devotional, July 15, 2013, <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/god-bless-you.html>

[9] Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas Morrison, Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life, 81.