

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
TWO TRIBES IN YOUR BELLY

Texts on Sunday, July 10, 2011

Genesis 25: 19-26; Acts 15: 1-12

Many years ago, membership at my village church upstate was popping. Among the new attenders coming to an inquirers' class was a couple with a very literal approach to the Bible, a very strict view of salvation and damnation, and more. Now, these views were not like my own, nor like those of most in the church, but up to a point, having differing views in the pews is a good thing. I was glad the couple was there—and was not expecting the two phone calls following our second inquirers' class. First, the conservatively minded woman—let's call her Connie—informed me that if a certain liberal-minded woman continued in the class—let's call her Libby—then Connie and her husband would not join the church. Hours later, Libby called. "If Connie and her husband keep coming to this class, Rev. Phelps, I won't be joining the church." Oh my! Isn't the church like Rebekah! How "the children struggle within her—and she says, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'" And how the Lord still says, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided."

In response to both Connie and Libby, I acknowledged how difficult it is to live and love with great differences in worldview and ethics. But only to Libby could I make this invitation. "In this church, we are exploring the frontiers of inclusion. We have claimed great ground for love and for justice with our inter-racial, inter-faith practices, with our blessings of unions of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and our always inquiring into the Bible. I know you're here because of what we stand for. We are not changing what we stand for. But here is a new frontier: Can we include those who exclude? I don't know," I said. "Can we make space for a Connie to try hearing a new word in an accepting fellowship? Let's work on this." Libby joined. Connie and her husband withdrew. Beyond a phone call, I did not pursue them.

We are going to listen to stories from Genesis this summer. They tell like one cliff-hanger after another. At God's call, old Abraham and Sarah walk off into the desert. In the Bible's blunt word, Sarah is barren. Now she gives birth to a son Isaac. Then, as Bob Dylan sang it, "God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son.' Abe says, 'Man, you must be puttin' me on.' God say, 'No.' Abe say, 'What?—'" At the last instant, Isaac is saved. Later, Isaac's wife Rebekah is said to be barren. Then she conceives . . . hateful twins. The strife inside overwhelms her. On it goes. All of Genesis has these themes: *We are old, we are few, we are barren and famished, flanked by enemies, hating our own*

brother. Are we going to make it out of here into the future?

While every Jew living today offers an irreducible Yes in answer to that question, how very many churches offer an uncertain response. So like the Genesis heroes, many complain, *We are old, we are few, we are barren and famished and flanked by enemies. We hate our own brothers and sisters. How are we going to make it into the future?* Some church people really don't care whether their church has a future. No matter how old or few the fellowship becomes, their main care is their own comfort. *May all remain the same until my funeral.* The Genesis stories counsel against this anxious effort to "save your life," as Jesus put it. They reveal how a people who will have a future learn to lose their life for the sake of the gospel that they may receive life without end but God. I call these stories "lessons in the beginning."

Rebekah, it seems, had a difficult third trimester. Had she the benefit of health insurance, she would have inquired not of the LORD, but of her ob/gyn, who would have ultra-sounded-out her problems. "Looks like twins, Mrs. Abrahamson. Now, some pain is normal. Take this pill and rest." She would accept her pains personally, as we generally do—as events of no significance. But Rebekah inquires of the LORD. There, she receives a very different account. It is not a personal but a public story about the purpose of her pains. "Two nations are in your body," translates Everett Fox. "Two tribes from your belly shall be divided. One shall be stronger than the other; and the elder shall serve the younger." What can this mean?

Three times in *Genesis* two brothers are found in mortal conflict. First it was Cain and Abel, then Isaac and Ishmael, now Jacob and Esau. The stories say not much about most of these figures, but they do say that Abel, Ishmael, and Esau hunted game, while Cain, Isaac, and Jacob ate grains. Now, these vegetarians are not the nice boys in these stories; Cain murders, Jacob deceives. But it is the vegetarians—the farmers—who live in Israel's memory.

These stories of brothers with fated destinies recall the time when tribes at different levels of development competed directly for use of that sliver of land called the "fertile crescent." It was mother earth to them all, but hardly bigger than a belly. We know how it all turned out. The farmers, not the nomads, had the leisure to think, to invent weapons and defenses, to write and pass their thoughts to the generations, to become large tribes, to have good stories to tell to hundreds, then thousands. They won. They eliminated those who threatened their crops. Yet a deep wisdom kept them close to the memory that those they destroyed were also their brothers. "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."

Now, we won't try to map ancient farming technique onto church growth strategy. No, the water in the well of this story flows far deeper than that. Israel's spiritual genius was to stand for something; to understand that its surviving and thriving depended, first and last, on their holding to that stand by the power of God, come what may. Holding fast does not mean they were always faithful. It means that when leaders and prophets called them to their constituting purpose for being, they did not destroy those leaders or their words. In repentance, they came home to their stand.

The oracle given to Rebekah inscribes this message deep in the mind and heart of the people. Two tribes are in your belly, two ways of being and working in this world, but you cannot be both. You cannot go limping between two gods. No one can serve two masters. You cannot make peace with incompatible visions, or incompatible practices. Separation is sometimes required for a people to thrive. One thing must emerge stronger. You must discern when the elder—the old way—will give way to the newer.

On Pride Sunday, I read from a sermon of twenty years ago, wherein I had called on the whole church to begin blessing the unions of gay and lesbian couples, and stating that I myself would be doing so for any Christians that asked. Now, that sermon came in the season of Lent, and though my word was not easily heard by all, the people lent their ears.

Three members of the governing council, however, grew very angry. They decided to poll the people secretly in a bid to oust me from the pulpit. On Good Friday, they wrote to the whole congregation. On Holy Saturday, the letters came into the homes—and something strange happened. While the people had not arrived at one with my word, as a whole they knew that the angry men had broken something sacred with a poisoned pen letter dated "Good Friday." The church knew the men had departed wholly from the purpose of the Christian church. Not one member answered them, beloved and respected though they were.

Oh, there were certainly two tribes in that belly. But rather than collapse into confusion, fear, and hostility, the church as a whole stood for something—for love and respect in Holy Week, at the least. They rebuked the men, and thereby separated the whole church from an older, primitive way of being that had been free to use treachery and threats and fear. Two tribes in your belly, yes—but one shall be stronger than the other. The elder shall serve the younger. It cannot be a coincidence that in the following Easter season, that church gave a wholly new hearing for urgent social and ethical questions. The congregation grew by a third before the year was out. You must stand for what your God reveals to you. This is the message the Genesis story has encoded and inscribed for all generations.

You can hear it again in the story of the Jerusalem council from Acts 15, when the elder James and all the assembly listened in silence to Paul and Barnabas and concluded that they would separate themselves from the ancient tradition of circumcision and trust that God Holy Spirit will forever give Godself freely and without distinction to all who welcome the Spirit. Two tribes in your belly, but the elder must serve the younger.

Now the word comes to us at The Riverside Church. Have we two tribes in our belly? Certainly. But let us be clear what is not meant by “tribes.” Since that Jerusalem council, the notion that nations separate God’s children is dead for those who are alive in Christ. Having in one body different colors or nations or classes or genders or—it took a while to see this—sexual orientations has nothing to do with tribes, in the spiritual sense. This is the good news for those who are alive in Christ. Neither are different ideas, or different political alliances, the basis of distinguishing tribes—not in the church of Jesus Christ. If this body shall be a dove of peace, we need two wings, left and right. But what bird are we? If we shall fly, we must know.

So let us not be naïve about our need for division and decision. In the context of American power and its swooning wealth, Christians need to be even more sober-minded about our identity, our calling, our essential. Only as we understand what we stand for—in the spirit of Rebekah, in the spirit of the Jerusalem church—can we act with faith and confidence in and for the world. Some here are concerned that The Riverside Church is involved in too many projects and may thereby spread its resources too thin to be of much effect. The concern warrants attention. But let us not suppose that either cutting or establishing a program will help us clarify who we are in the power of God, the essential. Rules given from the top down, however necessary, cannot govern the hearts of the people, let alone the Holy Spirit.

To become one, not two; united, not divided; trusting, not doubtful is a lesson in the beginning. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a gift of God for a people who desire it with all their heart and mind and strength. Desiring to be of one mind means giving way for the silence of God to rule in you, just as the Jerusalem council did. Desiring one mind means courage to ask to be held to account, that you put to death the behaviors of the old self—the threats, the unkindness, the lies and confusion on which human power depends for its control. Desiring to become one means discerning the One who shall be stronger than all others, letting the elder serve the younger. When we come in full repentance to this word from the beginning, we are ready to fly.

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