

“ALL IN THE FAMILY”
July 10, 2011
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Esau was a hairy man. Jacob was a smooth man. Esau was a hunter, a man of the fields. Jacob was a man of the tents. Esau was his father’s favorite, Jacob his mother’s. The two were brothers. They were twins. They grew up together, sometimes friends, and sometimes enemies. Sometimes they were pawns in their parents little schemes. Sometimes they enlisted their parents in their own conniving schemes. They were, quite simply, family.

The book of Genesis is my favorite book in the Bible. It is the story, if not the history, of our origins. In other words, though little of Genesis is factually accurate, or even factually based, it is a book that attempts to answer important questions, to tell us the theological truth about our beginnings. What is God? Who are we? Who are we in relation to God? Who and what are we to and with each other? What does it mean to be fully human? What is family?

And the answers to these questions revealed in scripture are both remarkably insightful and inspiring and stalwartly realistic and unsentimental. From Adam and Eve, to Cain and Abel, on to Noah, then Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his four wives, Joseph. All these story arcs are deeply textured, and they reveal to us the full range of our human possibilities: from heroism to cowardice, from joy to anguish, from casual pettiness to a deep capacity for love and forgiveness. I love Genesis. I love it because it tells the truth, the whole truth, and in the stories of these first families of the people of God, we can locate our own stories, and maybe even come to truly believe that we too can authentically be God’s people.

Unlike Genesis, there is so much in our culture that idealizes, even idolizes a concept of family that is unrealistic and unattainable. And we get so caught up in that myth. Our families, we vow, will be places of perfect love and nurture. We will be wonderful partners, exemplary parents who will therefore produce consistently above average children: children who will never do drugs, never be in trouble with the law, children who will be loving and sharing with each other, bring home glowing report cards, grow up to have great and glorious careers, and never have a problem that can’t be solved by hard work and honest, loving discussion. That’s the myth, right? And if we don’t succeed at it, then we’re supposed to feel terrible about ourselves because we have failed. We are failures. I remember once, when my younger daughter was going through a difficult time in her adolescence, and I was at my wits end, never knowing if I was being too strict with her, or too permissive, and as much as I loved her and as hard as I tried, I didn’t have a clue what was the right thing to do, a well-meaning mother came up to me at a school function, and stated in a voice reeking of assurance, “You just need to have high standards and enforce them lovingly but firmly, and everything will be fine.” Then she patted me on the shoulder and melted into the crowd. I wanted to smack her, partly because her road was one that had crumbled beneath me long before, but mostly because she still believed the myth, and so far, so far, it had worked for her. And maybe it sometimes does work over the long term, but I think that’s the rare exception, not the rule. We, you and I, most of us, we will never be perfect parents or perfect sons and daughters, or perfect siblings; we will never have perfect families, because we aren’t perfect. And what’s wonderful about Genesis as it explores all manner of less than perfect families, is that unlike in the myth where if you fail, well then you’re a failure, in the biblical

story, success and failure live side by side, just like pettiness and love, and cowardice and courage. In Genesis, truly nasty boys can grow up to be equally heroic men, individuals and relationships change over time, women who thought they would never find joy again hear themselves laugh out loud, and you never know when, right in the middle of one of these less than perfect families, a moment of sheer holiness and grace might happen. You just never know.

I think that's the truth. Sometimes family is wonderful. Sometimes family is terrible. Always family is complicated, changeable, exhilarating, exhausting: the conflict and blessing of our lives. Take a few minutes someday and read the whole story of Jacob and Esau. Every time you want to rush to judgment, something happens, and you need to re-evaluate. That's family.

We say that the church is an extended family, and that's true, both in our ability to be fractious and difficult and in our ability to be one despite our imperfections and differences. And if single congregations are a family, then when The Church gets together as a whole, like at General Synod, then it's like a family reunion in the best and worst senses of that term. Ever since I got back from Tampa on Thursday, people keep asking me how Synod was, and I know the "right" answer is to say that it was wonderful, but really, it was family. Sometimes we stood revealed in our disputes, our power grabs, and our whines that "Mother always liked you best." And other times we were breathtakingly whole. We had moments of glorious worship and a sense of the divine presence; and other times when we tried, but didn't quite get there. Some speakers were riveting, even prophetic; others disappointing. The delegate seats were packed so close together that you couldn't take a deep breath without intruding on your neighbor's personal space. And then there were the amendments to the amendments to the amendments. I had three wonderful unexpected conversations at Synod, and went to the best worship workshop I've ever experienced. We passed some important resolutions that made me proud to be part of the United Church of Christ family, and passed others that were problematic for me. We said hellos and goodbyes, and did some important catching up. That's what you do at family reunions.

In two years, the 29th General Synod will be in Long Beach, CA, and all of us West Coast conferences are invited to be part of it, and I hope that many from this congregation will go and take part. I will go again, because the truth is that for good and ill, this is my faith family. This is the church I love and am committed to on its best days and its not so good days, and on all the ordinary days in between. It is the family born in the stories of Genesis, where imperfect people in their imperfect ways tried to discern how to know and love and serve God in their time in the particular circumstances of their lives. And still we, the people and families of God in our time, seek to do the same thing.

Just like the myth of the perfect family, I don't want the myth of the perfect church: a church that always gets it right, that sees God's will wholly and certainly, and has consistently wonderful General Synods. Because I wouldn't belong there. I don't always get it right, and I would never claim to know God's will wholly and certainly. Just like I've never known how to be a perfect daughter, sister, mother, or even second cousin.

I am a Genesis person. And for me, better than any myth of perfection, is the sure and certain knowledge that throughout the history of humankind, God has consented to dwell among the imperfect people, families, faith communities of the world. God knows us as we are, and still

claims us for Godself, still calls us all beloved ones, still invites us, despite our many failures, to try again for greater love and faithfulness. That is the truth I believe. And that is perfection enough for me. Thanks be to God. Amen.