

We continue in Genesis in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning. We were at the turning point of the family of Abraham and Sarah last week, with the near-death of the son of the patriarch and the subsequent death of Sarah.

Now we move to the next generation, and the story of the marriage of Isaac. Well, not marriage. Marriages. Two of them.

The next time someone starts preaching about Biblical family values, remember this story, one of the earliest ones, and an arranged marriage to a cousin, trickery by an uncle, and a second marriage to that cousin's sister while still married to the first cousin. So much for one man, one woman.

It's a messy family.

At Monday book group this past week, we were talking about genealogy and the story behind the neatly printed charts of who married whom and who begat whom. Names and lines and dates only begin to tell the story. I shared a different kind of genealogical chart called a genogram. It not only lists the names and the connections, it also lists things like who was in conflict with whom, who died young or of disease, who divorced whom, who suffered from alcoholism or addiction, who was mentally unstable. It gives those who study families a clearer picture of the patterns in a family, and if we try to draw up a genogram of this particular patriarchal family, Abraham and Sarah and their child who is now married to two cousins, we do see some patterns.

Abraham and Sarah have a complicated relationship. After all, Abraham drags Sarah out of the only community she has known to go to Egypt at the command of God, where he tries to pass her off as his sister so that he, Abraham, won't get into trouble with the Powers That Be. Well, if we look back at the part of the story that precedes God's interaction with Abraham, we do find out that Sarah is indeed Abraham's half-sister—those biblical family values again, right?—so Abraham isn't completely lying. I guess he figures half-lying isn't a sin. So now we've got Isaac meeting his beautiful, desirous bride-to-be, only to have her father trick Isaac into marrying the wrong sister. So already we've got deception between family members in play in both generations.

Patterns...another way of saying that history tends to repeat itself. Isaac and Leah and Rebecca will struggle with the same problem of infertility that plagued his parents. Rebecca's twin sons will struggle with power and damaged relationships...just as Abraham did, just as Isaac did, just as we do today.

Once again, we're in the realm of Dr. Phil, and as we read the story, we have the uncontrollable urge to say "How's that workin' for ya?" with a Texas twang.

And I don't know about you, but I also have the urge to say to God, "Gee, couldn't you find a somewhat less dysfunctional bunch of people to be the start of the great nation that ends up including us?"

But God's wisdom is deeper than our human understanding.

How can we be a part of the great nation unless we are just like our forebears? Great, brave, strong, complicated, endlessly creative, and yet imperfect, in need of our Creator to guide and correct and protect and occasionally rebuke...we are, indeed, just like our forebears.

In some stories, the characters are perfection personified. They are heroes, supermen and women who defeat evil, who struggle but inevitably triumph. We know that Superman will crush Lex Luthor. We know that Harry

Potter will vanquish Lord Voldemort. There's a comfort in stories like that...they make us feel that good will conquer evil, that we are safe, that heroes will rescue us. But that's not the way things work, is it?

As we grow older, we are no longer satisfied by Harry Potter or Superman, as much fun as they are. We recognize that they are fantasies. Inevitable victory on this earthly plane is not realistic. We know that the good will triumph at the end of days, but here on earth, there is no such guarantee.

And so we find ourselves reading more ambiguous stories, the conflicted and imperfect heroes of the mystery writer John LeCarre, the antiheroes of Albert Camus, Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment," Becky Sharp, Scarlett O'Hara. Much more interesting, because they are much more like what we know and what we experience. Flawed, making bad choices, trying to do the right thing but often taking the wrong path...

...rather like Paul, who says "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Rather like us. We know perfectly well when we do something wrong that it is, indeed, wrong. We do it anyway. Perhaps out of convenience, perhaps out of laziness, perhaps out of greed or jealousy or desire or familiarity, but we do it anyway.

And suddenly it makes sense why our Creator has chosen this incredibly messy family to be the starting point for the great nation. Because how can we know how beloved we are, in all of our imperfection, if we do not see how God can use Abraham and his dysfunctional clan to actually bring the promised great nation into being?

If God can take the guy who was married to his half-sister and allowed her to be taken by the Egyptian pharaoh for his harem, the same guy who nearly killed his own son, the son who was tricked by his uncle into a loveless marriage but then managed to get the girl he wanted, who turned out to not be as fertile as everyone liked...if God can take this Dr. Phil family and turn them into the Chosen People, even after they do stupid thing after stupid thing, then certainly God can use us to continue the story of the Chosen People.

What's a Creator to do, when that Creator wants to move the story of the relationship between created and creator to the next phase of the story? Pick a family, even an imperfect family, and give them what they need. And pick them up when they mess up. And correct them when they get off-track. And love them in spite of it all. Because the story of the relationship is about coming back again and again to the love between creator and created, in spite of the problems.

What's a person to do, an imperfect person, who wants to do what is right, but who keeps on making the wrong choice, who keeps on doing what he or she knows is off-track, but who keeps trying to turn back to the One who created her? Simply love the God who loves her so much that forgiveness is freely given, and strive to build a more perfect relationship.

What's a person to do? Love God, as best as we can. Love others, because we find God through other human beings who are just as imperfect as we are. Love ourselves, because God – who has really good judgment about such things – loves us beyond measure.

That's all there is to do. How will your Monday look different because of that?

Amen.