

First Persons: Rebecca
Genesis 27: 42 – 28:5; Matthew 20: 20-28
May 12, 2013 (Mother's Day)
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I Introduction

A week ago this past Saturday, we had a special session of Annual Conference that I attended and had a chance to see my friend Rev. Bruce Haskins, who was in Seminary with Drema and me. He was talking with great excitement about the fact that he was a new grandfather. He had a new grandson two months ago. It was wonderful to hear that, and then particularly poignant to hear on Thursday that the father of that new grandson had been shot in a home intrusion in Baltimore and killed. It brought home to me the fact that parenting is perilous work, that you just never know how the process is going to unfold. It does get reinforced all the time with us. You open the newspaper this week and three young girls who had been held captive for ten years in Cincinnati are now free. What does that feel like for them, obviously, and their parents?

Mother's Day is an important day to reflect on this really critical role, and the sometimes perilous work that is involved in that role. We started the sermon series that I've been calling "First Persons" last week. We're looking at some biblical narratives of characters in Scripture. Last week as we celebrated our Senior Recognition Sunday, we looked at the character of Samuel, and as Samuel moving from that transition of being a child into being an adult and what that was like. This Sunday, we're going to spend a little time with one of the Scripture's many mothers, Rebecca. I thought about doing what I did last week and going full into character and borrowing the muumuu that Kevin Settlege and Bob Benn used in the last Metro Players play, but I decided it was

going to be hard to bring that off with my customary decorum, so I avoided that.

II. Rebecca

I want to spend a little time with Rebecca because she's such an interesting character. She is one of the women in those narratives in Genesis that is clearly her own person. We always refer to her in the same breath with Isaac, who - of course - is the inheritor of that great promise given to Abraham. In many respects, Rebecca is the more interesting character in the story. She is certainly the more fleshed-out character in the narrative. But even more than that, when you read the story of Genesis, Isaac comes across as a relatively passive character. Things happened to Isaac. Rebecca makes things happen. She's a good place to explore some of the ins and outs of motherhood because she's got some things to teach us. But she's not a saintly character and, in many respects, is a somewhat troubling character which is also, I think, helpful on Mother's Day, because wondrous as mothers are, on Mother's Day we sometimes gloss over some of the nuances of our mothers. So, it's helpful sometimes to unpack all of that richness of what it means to be a mother.

One of the things that's hard about Rebecca is that, at least in the Scripture stories, she is so one-sided in her advocacy of Jacob to the exclusion of Jacob's twin, Esau. For all of us who are parents and wrestle mightily with how we share our love with our children equally, that's an unsettling and discouraging model of parenting. The Scripture very clearly says Isaac loved Esau and Rebecca loved Jacob. We all wrestle with how we bring some equality to the way that we love our children. This particular passage too and the story of Rebecca helping Jacob steal the blessing from Isaac is

also a really disturbing one in terms of both her one-sided advocacy of Jacob, and also her manipulation of Isaac and his blindness and the deceit. All of those pieces make it a really troubling story in many ways. I wonder though if the biblical writers saw it quite that way in that they spent some time explaining how these series of events led to this place and understanding at least, which may be the key of at least part of what motivates Rebecca as she engages in her parenting.

They started with wanting us to understand that Rebecca had a very profound spiritual revelation when these two twins were in her womb. God speaks to her in a very clear and very explicit way that the younger son, Jacob, is going to rule over the other son, Esau, and is going to be a special tool in God's covenantal relationship. That's important because in Isaac and Rebecca's society, younger sons were not worth nearly what older sons were. All of the benefits went to the older son - the benefits of inheritance, the benefits of blessing – so that it was assumed that the older son was going to be the one who carries on the family line. Rebecca now has this insight that God actually has a very special plan for the younger son, so “how do I care for that” becomes part of her discernment.

It was not helped that that whole dynamic was exacerbated by the fact that Esau was a big strapping manly man, the man that his father wanted. He was a hunter. He was assertive. He was the son that Isaac had dreamed of. Again, if you are Rebecca, how do you start to balance off the fact that you know that God has a very special plan for Jacob against all of the benefits that are accruing to Esau?

In a society in which women had little value and younger sons had little value, the biblical writers, I think, would want to suggest that, well, not maybe a model that we

want to follow, that there's some rationale at least for this deception in which Rebecca engages. That on some levels, she is trying in her own way to follow God's call and to subvert the power structures that are in place in her society as she tries to nurture both of these gifts that God has given her in her sons. She clearly loves both of them. She eventually, at the end of the story, sends Jacob away both to protect him but also to protect Esau. She says I don't want to lose both of you in this one day because if he kills you, he's going to get punished as well so I'm trying to keep the whole system safe.

III. Learning from Rebecca

That doesn't explain or justify Rebecca's actions, but maybe it helps frame some of the things that she was wrestling with. Given that, I think there are some helpful things that we can learn from Rebecca about her mothering. The first is that while we would want to be clear that we love our children equally, that does not necessarily mean that we treat them in exactly the same way. Each child, even twins, they've got their own uniqueness that we are called to nurture and develop. Part of motherhood is figuring out how to give each of your children the thing that they need. Part of what all of us who grew up in families with siblings also need to keep in mind as we reflect on our own growing up is that our parents were seeking to provide each of us with the things that we need. This may not have felt fair or equal at the time that we were experiencing them but that we can know that our parents were seeking to give us the thing that they, at least, perceived that we needed.

But all children have specific gifts, and that part of the rule of parenting is to nurture those specific gifts which certainly leads to the second point which is it's so easy

as parents to impose our desires for our children's life on our children. This is what the wife of Zebedee was doing for James and John when she comes to Jesus. In this Gospel passage, she is essentially that parent who calls the teacher on the phone to berate them when their children don't get an A. She goes to Jesus and she says, "You know, my sons would be really good candidates to have on your right and left side when you come into your kingdom." I know some of you want a parent to be an advocate, but I think what Jesus suggests to her is, "You don't even know what you're asking, and it has nothing to do with who your sons are." So, part of the role of parenting is letting go of what we want for our children, and embracing and nurturing what God has planned for them which may be a different thing than we have. Our role as parents and the role of a mother is to help identify and nurture that uniqueness of a child that allows them to develop in their own way their own gifts that God has given them.

And then in a very dramatic way, Rebecca models the fact that the goal of good mothering is to have a child who is launched on their own and then starts living their own life. She sends Jacob away in a rather abrupt manner to go seek his life elsewhere, but the model is a good one - that if we are successful as parents, our children stop needing us in the same way. That's a hard, hard thing because I want my children to be utterly dependent on me forever emotionally, but I would have failed in my job if that were the case. We need to find ways to let them launch on their own and be who God has called them to be. This is part of the reason that so many Scriptures talk about God as a mother and hold up that wonderful image of the feminine piece of God who does all of those things with perfection, who knows each of our special gifts and idiosyncrasies and who nurtures that, who nurtures those gifts so that we can become

all who we have been created to be, who invites us into the process of co-creating ourselves with every choice that we make, and who then gives us the freedom to choose how we will continue to be in a relationship with God.

IV. From Rebecca to God

In addition to this being Mother's Day, it is also Ascension Sunday, the Sunday on which we celebrate after Christ's 40 days post-resurrection on earth, Christ going back into the heavens. His message to his disciples is not dissimilar from Rebecca's, "this period of our relationship when I am with you physically and guiding you and nurturing you is done now." As you grow in your relationship with God, it's going to be a different kind of relationship empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is what Bill Holmes was writing about in his book *Mature Christianity*, that we're in a different place now, that Christ is not present with us but that we are empowered by the Spirit to live out lives that are rich and full, and God-filled and bear fruit.

Parenting, motherhood, is a wondrous and perilous endeavor. It's one that is filled with breathtaking gifts and wondrous moments of joy. It's also filled with its fair share of frustrations and disappointments, and sometimes tragedies.

V. Conclusion

So, we celebrate that process as a community today knowing that as Abraham Lincoln said, "Everything that I am and everything I will be is due to my mother." Celebrating that and celebrating also the great gift of experiencing God as mother who nurtures us, and develops us, and calls us to be all who we have been created to be

and then to share that gift with the children who are all around us.

Amen.