

From Rivalry to Ruin

Genesis 25:19-34

There's a rivalry brewing in the parsonage. No, it isn't between the Mr. and Mrs. currently living there over how to fix the Church Street House. The developing rivalry is between our canine cohabitants: Bling, the reigning queen of the realm of Hayes, and Fusco, who is best suited to be the court jester.

The rivalry is evident at all hours of the day and night, especially with their decibel-raising barks and bays echoing from the heights of the village Cathedral. Bling, who has always possessed a "little-dog syndrome," makes sure every passer-by within earshot—two-legged and four-legged alike—are aware that trespassing on her territory is strictly prohibited by the Noank Zoning Commission. Fusco, who actually loves to have humans and critters around to play with and sniff, reacts at the sound of Bling's call of the wild with one of his own—a sharper, higher-pitched, painfully irritating yelp that tends not to be directed at the impending intruder, but at Bling herself! This creates such a cacophony of useless noise in our little home that Wendy and I have given up hope of ever having friends, since most people would interpret the bellicose bellowing from our dogs as a sure sign of our hostility to human contact.

Fusco, of course, being the second-born, is a bit of an upstart with puppy-like sensibilities. Though twice the size of his sister, he nevertheless eggs her on to attack him with biting and snarling and the gnashing of teeth—all with great delight, while he bellies up and let's her jump on him in ferocious fashion. Too dumb to feel pain, he embraces her with his large feathery paws, while Bling takes out her

frustration chewing on his ears. Then he throws her off and gets her to chase him around the house, bounding up onto the couch behind Wendy's motherly protection, bawling as if he were hurt so Bling will be scolded. It's a game he plays—all for entertainment, though by the look on Bling's face, there's no laughter or smiles emanating from her countenance.

Actually, their behavior is not unlike the rivalry I've always had with my younger brother, Peter, who was as much like Fusco as a kid, as I was like Bling. Even to this day, he tries to get my goat, which he does quite well as a conservative Republican, which I am not. Nary a day passes when he isn't feeding my inbox with some noxious article he's found online which ridicules or threatens the very values I espouse. He laughs, while I grind my teeth.

Rivalries are like that. They are in the relationships that we care about enough to instigate mischief or to react to it. Typically, they aren't that serious, in that laughter usually wins the day, either in the moment or in recounting the story later. Rivalries make for good sport, which is why the sports world cultivates them. Where would the Red Sox be without those hated Yankees (or vice versa); or the Patriots and the Jets; or the Bruins and Montreal; or Harvard and Yale? Unless there's money on the game, those are basically friendly rivalries that stir up the passions of the teams and their supporters. Nothing more than that.

More serious rivalries take on a different feel to them. Certainly, in our current times, the politics of Washington and throughout this country divide over the red and blue states and the nastiness and obstructionism that has made cooperative governing

almost impossible. There are some real things at stake over this battle for power and their inability to work together detrimentally impacts all of us. Defeating their rival has become more important to the players than the health and welfare of the nation. Who benefits from that? That's a serious problem for us as citizens and for the future of our country.

However, over the past few days, the historical rivalry between Israel and Palestine has taken an even uglier turn with the constant bombing of Gaza City by the Israeli Defense Forces and the barrage of rockets being fired by Hamas militants toward Israeli territory. The death toll is rising (and all on one side) and not inconsequential, for the fact that each victim becomes a rallying point for further attacks of retaliation and vengeance. As much as the world was hoping for a breakthrough in the peace talks a few months ago, now it's fearing the possibility of the entire Middle East exploding into Armageddon, especially if Israel moves ground troops into Gaza, since the Syrian border is already inflamed with violence!

Unfortunately, one of the tragic realities of deadly rivals is that they can't easily change the way they conduct themselves because it means remaking who they are and what they stand for. Armed warriors tend to view peace overtures as negating justice. That's the danger of rivals at war. Serious rivalries take combatants beyond the realm of what's reasonable and practical to a place where psychological and spiritual motivations are difficult to purge or correct. The roots of resentment grow deep into the souls of those who have been traumatized, which then justifies their own actions in a recurring cycle of violence as a warranted response to their enemies.

Those are the semantic games warriors play in the explanation of cause-and-effect—no different than a standard sibling rivalry (e.g., “he/she started it!” “It’s not my fault; I’m just defending myself!”). Out of fear of having the other unmask one’s vulnerabilities, the cycle of violence between serious rivals eventually becomes their own undoing.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict perpetually reflects this. While the rest of the world scratches their heads over why these two sides sabotage every prospect for peace and reconciliation, Palestinians and Israelis continue to exemplify why rivalry often leads to ruin. The underlying psychological warfare alone is more difficult to address than the individual crises and provocations that lead to another outbreak of war.

The psychology of rivals plays a major role in this impasse. Both sides are deeply traumatized and scarred by the wounds of genocide in their respective histories—the Holocaust and the Naqba. Because of that, both sides fundamentally distrust each other’s negotiating interests and goals. Both Israelis and Palestinians believe that the other side’s true objective is to eliminate their population and memory from the face of the earth.

Part of the game is to demonize your adversary sufficiently enough to where it’s a moral and just act to eliminate them. This becomes the looming obstacle to peace. Making peace with a rival means giving in to the desires and demands of the other side and risking your own survival in the process. All of this could be viewed as irrational and delusional against the metrics of reality, but that doesn’t matter. Once this mindset is established and reinforced for

generations, it's hard to see any other possibility. Serious and deadly rivalries create their own sense of reality that outside parties often will not see or grasp.

For that reason, Israel's disproportional attack on Gaza over this past week, resulting in well over 150 Palestinians killed with no corresponding Israeli loss of life, is viewed as a huge victory by many Israelis, whereas most of the rest of the world condemns it as egregiously brutal relative to the real threat from Hamas militants. But in this rivalry, it isn't proportional warfare that matters when the fear of survival is at stake.

This gets at the heart of the problem for Israel in particular: the obsessive defensive posture and chronic overkill is there to prevent vulnerability and any exposure of the fundamental question—do we have the moral right to exist here as a sovereign nation? Hamas' denial of that right to exist is what gets under the skin of Israelis more than anything else. This is the psychological power that a rival commands (which Hamas exploits), even when no comparable firepower on their part constitutes a legitimate threat to Israel. Like a sibling rival, Hamas knows how to push the emotional and psychological buttons on Israel in a way to provoke overreaction from them that ultimately brings them international scorn and shame. It's crazy-making; it's manipulative and maniacal, but it works virtually every time!

This psychology of rivals is illustrated quite well in our lectionary text from Genesis, which is less about two brothers, Jacob and Esau, and more about two nations, Israel and Edom. Whenever I've looked at this story, I've never warmed up to the character of

Jacob, even though he is the one of the biblical patriarchs. He, of course, outwits his brother, Esau, and wins in the end. If it's viewed theologically (as most traditions would take it), then it suggests to us that God prefers the manipulative, deceitful, calculating Jacob over the rather dim-witted Esau, meaning, the lineage of Israel is preferred over the other Semitic nations in the region. This certainly sounds like a story out of the annals of Israel (which it is), but it doesn't garner universal appeal, implying God favors one nation over all others. It serves the interests of ancient Israel and no one else, which is why we should view it as no more than a tribal myth.

If the story is to be interpreted morally, I think it gets even less appealing. The lesson would be this: the end justifies the means. As long as Jacob secured the birthright owed to his brother, it doesn't matter how he did it. Dishonesty and manipulation are rewarded. The moral objective is to beat your rival in the game of life and rob him of what was rightfully his. Now go and do likewise.

So you see the problem? It doesn't work very well to view Jacob as the exemplary one. Tradition has it wrong. Maybe the story isn't meant to be instructive as a model for moral behavior, or to make any particular claims about God, or Israel's sense of being uniquely chosen. It appears the best way to interpret this narrative is to view it as it is—a mythical description of the rivalry between Israel and its neighbors. Their common Semitic ties made them siblings of a sort, but their destinies were different.

If you view the birthright as a claim upon the land west of the Jordan, particularly the fertile zones and the settled regions—valuable land in the Fertile Crescent—then it is a way to convey through

historical hindsight how and why Israelites settled into this particular region and why they considered themselves superior to their rivals and neighbors. Esau, the hunter, was driven away and succeeded by Jacob, the shepherd, merchant, and settler. It isn't a theological or moral claim on the present or future of Israel; rather, it's a tribal tale of what already occurred in the past to explain, if not justify, how land was divided up in prior generations. Every succeeding generation had its own "Jacobs" and "Esaus" who became rivals in their own right.

Fast forward to our present time and it seems evident to me a similar rivalry continues to play out, frequently in deadly ways. Who will claim the birthright in our generation? That is yet to be determined. If the rivalry between Israelis and Palestinians doesn't result in ruin for either side, then it's likely some agreement will allow them to coexist as neighbors, where they may actually find a better state of life between them. But if their rivalry leads to their mutual ruin, then it will not be a biblical tale that inspires or prophesies it; it will be their own shortsightedness to allow their rivalry to ruin their futures and the quality of life each could enjoy.

The problem is, rivals don't like to admit mistakes, especially before the other. Nor do adversaries want to take risks that might expose their own vulnerabilities. That's why ancient stories still speak to us today. But life on this planet doesn't need to be a game of rivals, where sides compete for survival. Jesus' life and message presented another way to frame reality, where enemies and rivals become partners and allies. There's the better way of cooperation and mutual interest—a treating of the other as you yourself would want to

be treated, i.e., the Golden Rule. It's an ancient and universal truth that brings hope, peace, mercy and trust to human relationships. When put into practice, it has a remarkable sensibility about it that challenges the status quo and potentially changes even the hardened hearts of enemies. It's the Gospel truth for the living and the great regret of the dead.

Rivalry is reality, no question about it. From the time of our birth until the day we die, we will all deal with it in whatever way we engage it or are impacted by it. The point is, competition brings out the best in us when it challenges us to be inventive or be better than we presently are. That works well when it ends with laughter, mutual respect, and appreciation. When it does not, it then often becomes our ruin.

It's the same for siblings as it is for nations—for humans as it is for dogs. May we figure out the difference so we can all live in this God-given home together.

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