

Two Halves Don't Make a Right

Genesis 25:19-34

In the sibling rivalry of my youth, I lacked a strategic position of dominance. I was third-born out of four, fairly short in stature, rather rounded in shape, and unskilled in the finer arts of brotherly warfare. Hence, it gave rise to my lifelong interest in peacemaking. My career has simply been a carryover from surviving childhood.

Amidst the brotherly battles, I recall my parents' roles as referees and arbitrators. Never in my memory did a developing disagreement ever result in a violent brawl due to my mother's or father's ability to recognize a rising rage in one or more of us, where they would swiftly intervene with the physical separation of bodies or, in my mother's case, a voice that would roar loud enough to clear wildlife from the nearby woods! We all realized we would suffer serious and permanent damage to our auditory organs if we didn't respond immediately to her beck and call.

That was a long time ago. Lo, these many years later, my brothers and I still find ways to cultivate our rivalry, exhibited mostly through the more refined and civilized exercise of debating religion and politics. Lively are those online conversations. One of us is a staunch, annoying conservative, another is an ideologically confusing libertarian Democrat, and the third is a hopelessly idealistic (but always well-intended) liberal. I shan't confess to you which one I am.

In any case, the three of us email our respective opinions and distortions of truth to the others on a regular basis, which then incite an immediate and anticipated reaction. Around and around we go, week after week, taking on the issues of the day in a vain attempt to convert each other to our personal points of view, which is a less violent way than punching

each other's lights out. Since, our mother's firstborn (which I am not) insists even into his old age on sucking up by copying her on every email, we can be sure that our semantic discourse remains decent and loving. Otherwise, she might intervene in usual form, except this time in capital letters.

Admittedly, parental intervention was necessary in our childhood and youth, where we were usually admonished with wisdom that served us well throughout our adult years. Sayings like: "I don't care who started it, I'm ending it!"; "No one said life is fair!"; "I brought you into this world and I can sure as well take you out of it!" But the one I probably heard most was, "Two wrongs don't make a right!" That is one I myself have used as a father, which makes perfect parent-sense. As a kid, you always think you're in the right, so it took a while before I grasped it. But when you are a parent intervening in a tit-for-tat sibling dispute, rarely do you view the matter merely one-sided. In your eyes, both are in the wrong and it's your job to makes things right.

As rivalries take on age and exist outside of the household, we tend to view them somewhat the same. When there is a dispute, instead of accurately and objectively accounting for what has happened, it's more likely that each side will portray themselves as a victim of the other, or at least justified in taking the action they have. Rivalries end up being expressed in half-truths and misrepresentations, as each one presents their case for why things occurred as they have. If an arbitrator hears only one side of the story, it's likely a distortion of the truth shaped to benefit the storyteller, instead of being impartial reporting or even an empathetic portrayal of the other party.

This especially holds true when stakes are high. Anytime the consequences are costly, plaintiffs and defenders will go to extraordinary lengths (and sometimes great expense) to protect their self-interests, so they will tell their side of the story to best guarantee the desired outcome. Even in our system of justice it's extremely unlikely a judge or jury in a court of law will receive an accurate accounting of unassailable facts from adversaries. What they get are half-truths for the most part, which taken together may provide sufficient evidence to arrive at a verdict. At times, though, verdicts are rendered without arriving at the underlying truth or to make things right. Partial truth results either in partial justice or injustice.

The problem with half-truths is also one reason historians are skeptical of what comes down to us as common history, because they know it's likely a biased portrayal of what occurred. As a rule, "history" tends to be the record of those in the position of power—the victors, the conquerors, and the eventual establishment—not the perspective of those who have suffered or who lost. So good historians investigate what isn't told. One of the advantages of living in the era of mass media and global communications is that access to the "untold story" is more readily available to us than in the past, putting us in a better position to appreciate the fuller account of events of an earlier time. For example, historians (as well as recent biographers of early American leaders) virtually have rewritten the conventional myth about the "discovery" of the New World and the founding of our nation, where we now understand a different story of early American history than most of us received in our formal education. The reason is, they've accounted for the other side of the story from native people, women, indentured slaves, and other perspectives commonly marginalized and never heard in the past.

The same can be said relative to current events: an informed citizen is one who examines a variety of sources to better understand the full story, rather than making false assumptions about the circumstances of whole populations based on ideology or partial truths. But it requires effort to do this, since ideology and partisanship of all types intentionally slant the news. So, we must be careful about our sources and be sure we're hearing the whole story. It's not enough to simply parrot the opinions of a few favorite pundits. For if we don't bother to listen to other views, the great cultural divide we deplore will continue to grow as people debate issues misinformed and acting on half-truths. To paraphrase my mother, two halves don't make a right.

The sense of rivalry and biased half-truths play into many of the stories we often take at face value out of the biblical canon. Certainly, that is the case with the Genesis tales of Jacob and Esau, who symbolize both the nature of sibling rivalry and a one-sided narrative of history that impacts the world even to this day.

Whenever I've looked at our text for today, I will admit, I've never warmed up to the character of Jacob, even though he was the one of the biblical patriarchs. According to the story here in Genesis 25, Jacob outwitted his brother, Esau, and effectively stole his birthright (granted, the rights of the firstborn in the birth of twins seem a bit overstated!). Nevertheless, if the tale is viewed theologically (as most traditions take it), then it suggests that God favored the manipulative, deceitful, calculating Jacob over the rather dim-witted Esau, meaning, the lineage of Israel is preferred (albeit, "chosen") over the other Semitic nations in the region. This certainly sounds like a sibling rivalry (e.g., "Mom loves me most!")—the sort of half-truth that serves the interests of one particular party.

Indeed, that's true. This story comes out of the annals of Israel, serving the interests of ancient Israel and no one else, which is why we should pause and recognize it as little more than a tribal myth. A comparative myth out of the annals of Edom might paint a different picture of who was divinely chosen. So, theologically, we must keep this in mind: a biblical story that favors Israel at the expense of other tribes and nations is intentionally self-serving and one-sided. Is this the entire story? No. Is a half-truth ever the whole truth? You tell me.

If the story is to be interpreted morally, I think it comes across as 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 unethically he did it. Dishonesty and deception 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. That's basing ethics on utility, not morality.

So, do you see the problem? It doesn't work very well to view Jacob as the exemplary one. Tradition has it wrong; it's made a half-truth the whole truth. 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 from north of Galilee down through the Jordan River valley—valuable land in the Fertile Crescent—then this story really begins to make sense as a way to convey

through a tribal myth how and why Israelites settled into this particular territory and later felt destined to return there and why they viewed the rights of their rivals and neighbors inferior to their own claim that it was their Promised Land. Esau, the hunter, was driven away and succeeded by Jacob, the shepherd, merchant, and settler. This story then isn't really a theological or moral claim on the nature of Israel; rather, it's a tribal tale to explain, if not justify, how this land was divided up thousands of years ago. As far as the Israelites were concerned, they outwitted their sibling rival and claimed the right to it. It's more descriptive, than prescriptive.

That said, the notion of a Promised Land will only stand up if we limit ourselves to half the story. The rest of the story lies in the claims that others make. Take, for instance, the present rivalry between Israel and Palestine. In spite of the longstanding and reasonable support for the security of Israel, the generational claim of Palestinians to the land is at least equal if not greater, based on the last several centuries, if not thousands of years. The ancient biblical claim for Israel may be the most well-known part, but it's certainly not the entire story, nor is it prescriptive for these times.

The other part is of those who have lived there for generations, perhaps as far back as the Roman occupation of Syria Palestina two thousand years ago, which is the case for some Palestinian families. Over the course of human history, Palestinians have lived in this region far longer than Jews. Christians who presume that Israel alone has the divine right to the land based on biblical evidence are greatly mistaken—both regarding the ancient story and by overlooking the rightful claims of justice. Clearly, it's another case of where history is being written by those with power, who often legitimate their claim to it by divine right.

Even if many Christians point to the Jacob stories as a biblical rationale and mandate for their support of the state of Israel, the so-called birthright is still tenuous as a prescription for rights today, for even the story depicts it as a stolen right—Jacob manipulating Esau over a mess of pottage. As I see it, Israel and Palestine will never achieve peace until the rights to exist are recognized by both sides and for the dreadfully deprived and powerless people of Palestine to have their claims to the land legitimately recognized—they whose land was taken from them, much like Esau. It's a matter of negotiating territorial claims—not of supporting violence and oppression. Moral truth is only known when the entire story is accounted for. A half-truth is not a divine right.

As Christians, there's something else to consider: didn't Jesus' life and message present another way to frame reality from rivalry and religious-based racism and bias—where enemies and rivals instead become partners and allies? Wouldn't that carry more moral weight for us than anything else? Didn't he embody the better way of cooperation and building mutual trust—a treating of the other as you yourself would want to be treated, i.e., the Golden Rule? Wouldn't mutual respect and fairness in dividing up the land be far more Christian than a blind allegiance and support for one side over the other? Justice and mercy and wisdom require both sides of the story to be told.

The spirit of the Golden Rule is an ancient and universal truth that beckons us with a selflessness toward others to counter the self-interest we naturally bring to our own side of each and every story. Reconciling with rivals by incorporating their narratives into our own brings hope, peace, mercy and trust to human relationships. When put into practice, Golden Rule ethics have a remarkable sensibility that challenges the status quo and

potentially changes even the hardened hearts of enemies. On so many levels, it's the gospel truth for the living, and all too often, rivalry 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 one way or another. Although the spirit of competition may challenge us to be inventive or aspire us to something greater than we presently are, it will only end in ruin if it doesn't yield to cooperation through generous caring, mutual respect, and goodwill. When the stakes are so high (as they are in the Middle East; as they are in our own country with the partisan divide), we can do better; we must be better for our children and our children's children. Whether this is a story about siblings or nations, may our present generation rediscover and embrace Golden Rule ethics, so people can dwell together, safely, securely, and cooperatively, wherever and whenever they share the common blessings of the land.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
16 July 2017