

Sermon – The Sins of the Father  
Genesis 26

Traits and traditions are often passed down from one generation to another. From the cleft in one's chin to Grandma's chicken soup recipe to the way in which we grieve – we see that qualities and behaviors of one generation are often handed down to the next in both subtle and profound ways. Some of these traits are inherited. Blue eyes cannot become brown without the assistance of colored contact lenses. But other traits are chosen – or more passively accepted – as the way things are, the way things should be.

Family systems theory clings tightly to this claim. Practitioners of this school of thought note that relational patterns are often passed down from generation to generation. One author writes:

Families repeat themselves. What happens in one generation will often repeat itself in the next; that is, the same issues tend to be played out from generation to generation, though the actual behavior may take a variety of forms... The hypothesis is that relationship patterns in previous generations may provide implicit models for family functioning in the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

This claim could certainly be made with regard to Isaac and his father, Abraham. Isaac was a child of promise – the one through whom God's blessing would be secure: a blessing transmitted through the generations from Abraham to his heir,

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<sup>1</sup> McGoldrick, Monica; Randy Gerson, and Sylvia Shellengerger: *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*. P 8.

the son of Sarah, and on down the line. The 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis is the only chapter in the Bible that gives us Isaac's story, alone. Sure, there are many more stories of Isaac in scripture – but most are either a part of father Abraham's story, or the narrative of his son Jacob – who will be called Israel. Chapter 26 is the only chapter where Isaac is the sole human actor – where we read together who he is, what his legacy entails, who he meets along the way.

Yet this chapter begins with a story that sounds all too familiar to us. We hear that, once again, there was famine in the land. And Isaac, as did his father before him, needed to strategize how he would provide for himself and his family.

Our text opens with Isaac facing the same choice laid before his father when he too had encountered famine in the land. While Abraham fled to Egypt, God stopped Isaac from taking such a route. God spoke to Isaac and reiterated God's blessing to him, commanding him to stay in the territory promised to him and his people by God. The blessing that God issued to Abraham – of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky – is the blessing spoken, now, to Isaac too.

Isaac remains faithful to God's call, staying within the larger region, but moving to a town called Gerhar and toward the Philistine king, Abimelech. Yet, in spite of God's reiteration of blessing, **Isaac too becomes a man of fear – just like his Dad.** While seeking haven within the safety of a new city, he too grows afraid that he will be put to death because of the beauty of his wife. With self-preservation mode fully in place, Isaac employs a strategy used not once, but twice, by his father. *Isaac tries to pass off his wife as his sister in order to spare his own life.* Afraid that he will be murdered by men wishing to have Rebekah for themselves, Isaac introduces

Rebekah as his sister. Rebekah can be viewed as fair game by the men of Gerhar. She is unprotected by the marriage covenant – but Isaac himself is safe.

Lies often have a way of surfacing. The story tells us that the king sees Isaac in a romantic embrace with Rebekah and calls him out. Abimelech names the lie in which Isaac was caught – and names the repercussions that could have fallen on him and the men of his kingdom if the lie were perpetuated. The king reminded Isaac that actions have consequences – and as the Egyptians had faced God’s wrath in the face of Abraham’s lie about Sarah, the same consequence could have occurred to him and his men on Rebekah’s behalf. Rebekah is now presented as Isaac’s wife and the men of Gerhar are told to keep their hands off of her. Crisis averted. The men of Gerhar are safe again – and Isaac too is assured of his safety.

Yet again there is a detail missing from this text. The same concern was missing from the story the two times that Abraham pulled this same stunt with Sarah in the past. **No one speaks about the women. *The women do not have a voice.*** No one speaks of the ramifications that Isaac’s lie could have had on Rebekah. No one comes to *her* defense. No one names the repercussions that could have harmed Rebekah if this lie went on: repercussions like rape, repercussions like trafficking, repercussions like physical and emotional violence, and their traumatic after-effects.

Rebekah’s voice is not included in the conversation – just as her mother-in-law’s voice was absent in conversations of old. The women are acted upon – not actors themselves. The systemic and personal deprivation of any power by Rebekah leaves her vulnerable, and a victim of sexual exploitation.

Isaac’s story – and Rebekah’s story too – begins as one in which history repeats itself. It is a story in full of systemic violence against women that goes unchecked and unnamed. No one names the fact that women were treated as the property of men in the first place. No one names that the voices of these women were silenced. No one names the institutionalized sexism that diminishes the potential for women to be viewed as full citizens, with full rights, and with full agency over their own bodies.

**Chapter 26 reminds us that Isaac’s story is not unlike his father’s before him.** God’s promises to Abraham are transmitted to Isaac too: God continues to bless him. God continues to provide for him. God continues to build a future for God’s people through him. Yet in spite of God’s promises, Abraham’s fear and faithlessness takes root in his son. When any threat to security or status or the ability to control one’s destiny shows up, catastrophic decisions are made. Lives are threatened. Trust is broken – with God and with others.

You would think they would learn!

We know Isaac and Rebekah’s story all too well. When we turn on the nightly news we see headlines that jumped from the screen just decades ago – and in many cases, decades before that.

We see how arms deals once made to foster alliances now breed instability in tense regions of the world. We see the escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians and don’t know how to break the cycle of violence in the Middle East. We see how corporate corruption and greed lead to fragile economies. We see how laws that tighten voter identification engender racism. We see that tightening our borders breeds xenophobia and perpetuates poverty. We see

legislation upheld by the highest courts of the land that limit a woman's ability to make medical and personal decisions for herself and her family, and place that right in the hands of her employers. History repeats itself for us. You would think *we* would learn!

How do we break the cycle? How do we read these texts with an eye inward, that we might notice our own fear enacted in oppressive ways? How do we read these texts with an eye outward – and with a willingness to give voice to the voiceless and to challenge systems that breed exploitation and oppression?

Our first clue is embedded in the text. It is grounded in trust: trusting in God's presence, providence and blessing. Trust that what God says is true. Trust that you are loved. Trust that God is with you. Trust that just as God has clothed the lilies of the field, so will God clothe you. Allow God's promised blessing be your anchor when fear wells up. Allow God's promises to trump your fear. Every time.

Trust that God is love. And know that God's love isn't a door-prize extended to the person who draws the winning number. God's powerful, redemptive love is offered to all.

This love, these promises, God's presence are sources of strength and power – but not power-over, power within. This love, these promises and God's presence speaks truth to the lies we face and the lies we create. These promises reorient us toward the real and living God who is calling us – and everyone else – to abundant life.

And know that it is to this love that you are called – that we are called. We are called to look at each other with eyes of love, to know each other with minds of love, to relate to one

another with hearts filled with love. **Love is to set the tone for human interaction – not fear, not violence, not hate...**

And we must act. We must not stand idly by and allow injustices and systemic and personal violence to repeat itself. We must take a hard look at the sin within and the sin around us, and humbly work toward change. Thomas Merton writes:

To some...peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob others without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure...

So instead of loving what you think is peace, love others and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself* not in another.<sup>2</sup>

Merton invites us to self-examination and an awareness of the needs of others. These insights can help us break the cycles of exploitation, oppression and harm seen in our text and in our world today.

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<sup>2</sup> Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. P122.

Isaac had a choice to make. He could have chosen personal peace born from the vulnerability of another. Or he could have chosen the peace that surpasses all understanding – bred from the promises of a present God whose blessing was with him, even in the midst of his own vulnerability.

We have a choice to make too. We can choose personal peace born from the vulnerability of others. Or we can choose the peace that comes from knowing, trusting, and embracing the love and justice of God. We can choose this peace, even when such a choice leads us to feel, or even *be* more vulnerable – when doing so is only possible by surrendering some of our privilege in order to level out the playing field; or surrendering some of our wants to ensure the fulfillment the needs of others.

What will you choose? What will we choose, together? Which qualities would we like to pass on to the next generation? Which patterns do we hope our children will inherit?

My prayer is that our legacy, by God's grace, will be one of radical hospitality, of caring for the needs of others, of working for justice, of embodying risk-taking love – so that not just us, but everyone will know lasting, abiding authentic peace. Amen.