

**“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.  
Now remain in my love.”**

Sermon for 15 December 2019

Texts: Gen. 27:18-29; 45:10-15; John 15:9-17

The love of the Father for the Son, with which the Son has loved his followers, is not in this picture from Gen. 27. **That love**, the love of the Father, a standard, and the kind of love we are to **remain in**, is the Christmas love we are celebrating today. Why is it absent? I think that there is, behind this episode the kind of presumption of divine incapacity—the kind that informs the incident of Uzzah being struck down for touching the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:6-8)—on the part of Rebekah. The idea is that God needs my assistance or the project fails—the ark topples, or the wrong son gets the blessing! It was the folly of Uzzah to think that God could not keep his ark upright without his stabilizing it! *What kind of help does God actually need to accomplish his purposes?* None. God may choose to use me, but my contribution is negligible. If he needs someone pure, good, and faithful; he might have to pass over my help! The credit should go to God—“look what God has done!” is the cry of the godly servant. God doesn’t need an anxious mother, a control freak, an arch deceiver, a star manipulator or a master of disguise!!

Gen. 27:18-29 presents us with a picture of fond intimacy, love, between a father and his eldest son. Only it’s a fraud. Isaac is not blessing Esau because Esau is not even there—in his place is Jacob, faking it. Jacob is pulling off a calculated ruse: a deception plotted by his mother, Rebekah, against his father, Isaac. Godly love is, to put it bluntly, *totally absent from this domestic scenario*. Instead, Isaac is deceived by his wife and son in all his five senses! There is a caution here for all who trust in their senses to know what’s true. People who say, “I can’t believe in a God I cannot see.” should heed this caution. Believing is not simply a matter of seeing—what Isaac thought he was *seeing* wasn’t there to be seen at all.

And this “verification fail” is not for want of trying. Isaac sincerely desires to know if Esau is indeed before him (and not some imposter). The last sense to be employed in this “discovery” is smell: **Come near and kiss me my son. So he came near** (meaning Jacob, the deceiver, came near) **and kissed him.** (v.26) And Isaac **smelled the smell of his garments**—but the garments were not on Esau!!—**and he blessed him** (Jacob). The kiss was a pretext for the test of smell. Two questions arise: Why is Isaac so distrustful? And how did Isaac’s family get to this bleak and loveless place?

I want to start answering these questions by citing John Bunyan’s great work, Pilgrim’s Progress: “As I walked through the wilderness of this world,” and substitute the words “brush and briars”: “As I walked through the briars, the thorn-brush of this world.” Because this world is filled with briars—thick brush such as caught up Absalom by the hair and left him low hanging fruit for his murderer. Furthermore we are like sheep who get entrapped by these briars—Isaac’s home life was not exception. This briery condition has prevailed since the Fall! We and Isaac and Rebekah are in the messes we are in because we are all fallen, all sinners; and we are entrapped by the briars of sin. For example, the contention for leadership in Isaac’s home derives from sin’s consequences as written in Gen. 3:16, *especially for Rebekah*: **I will surely multiply your pain in childbirth; in pain shall you bring forth children. Your desire shall be**

**for your husband and he shall rule over you.** Rebekah must have felt that she got a double dose of consequence in giving birth to her twins! But, more pointedly, her sinful desire to oppose her husband and to overrule him is on full display in Gen. 27, the whole chapter. Adam's sin is also passed down to Isaac. He *sinfully* abandons his post as husband to Rebekah (to lead, guard and care for his wife) to such a degree that distrust and suspicion have displaced the love that God<sup>1</sup> intended for their relationship of oneness. And the love that is missing is the love of the Father I referred to above. The delight, pleasure and favor with which the Father loved the Son, that is the standard and, again, it is missing. They have not remained in that love. And, alas, many of us suffer from a like deficiency in our own hearts.

Rebekah was also derelict as wife. Instead of manipulating him, she could have coaxed her husband, giving him good counsel, urging and persuading him of what she saw as the better course. She could have reasoned with him about the promise of God, and the oracle of favor regarding Jacob. She could have given advice rather than grasping at opportunity and helped him succeed as a father, one who could ditch favoritism in favor of equity and fairness. No deception, no bitterness, no envy—that could have been the result of being a good wife and mother. They could have planned together, instead of plotting against each other—seeking detours around each other as obstacles to their purposes. Imagine the consequence of David's wife saying to him, "Please deal with Amnon. He raped his sister and now shames her for his lust. Please show your daughter a father's love regardless of your past. Do not neglect justice just because they are family. I'll come with you if you want, but I am confident you can do right by these two.

**"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love."** It simply is not possible to find the love of the Father in Gen. 27—which explains the inclusion of Gen. 45 in our readings. In the love of Joseph for those who hated him, and threw him into a pit to die, abandoned—his ten other brothers(!) who out of envy sought his destruction—it is in Joseph's love that we find the tender, rescuing, compassionate love of the Father mirrored. The love that Jesus points us to. *There is nothing of the eternal delight of the Father in the feelings of Joseph's brothers towards Joseph.* But Joseph, out of the depth of his sojourn with God in his prison life, as one previously cast into the earthly loveless family of Jacob. Joseph finds that love to which redemption, rescue and salvation are native—yes, the Father's love. And Joseph finds that love—despite his unjust circumstances, despite banishment, rejection and murderous hatred. Despite all that was against him, Joseph thrives on that love and graciously bestows it upon his non-expectant and undeserving brothers who were entirely at his mercy, and he was entirely empowered to judicially repay them. But he did not. He chose not to repay evil with evil.

He had the prototype of Christmas love to gift them with  
because he had remained in God's love himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I shouldn't have to qualify this by noting the love of God has been a constant from the beginning, but I will. The fact that Isaac and Rebekah predate the incarnation doesn't mean that the love of God was absent from creation—it was integral to the whole plan from Eden until our present day.

Picture, if you will, a lost sheep entangled in some brush and briars, trapped. That sheep hears the shepherd's call but simply cannot go towards that familiar voice. While that sheep strains at the briar's branches, there is no escape. It bleats and cries out its distress. The shepherd, hearing the desperation and the eagerness of the sheep to be free and run to the shepherd, seeks out that lost sheep. The shepherd has compassion on that sheep. He doesn't beat the sheep, berate the sheep, does he? The sheep doesn't encounter wrath, disgust, frustration, blame or judgment even. Rather encounters love, release and rescue.

No healthy parent would punish a child for getting sick, or punish a baby for becoming fussy when tired, or hungry, or soiled . . . admittedly, constant demands, sleepless nights and frustration with it all can overshadow one's paternal, or maternal love *and the child will sense the shift of motivation, the absence of love*. It is not wrong to get sick at all. But fatigue, frustration can become briars in the patch of one's child care. Sometimes it is necessary to take five and enumerate the briars you may have become entangled in! Past abuse, bad habits, tired conventions, present oppressions, trials and testings, aging, parental expectations, chemical imbalances and addictions seem to reach out and grab you, entangle you in themselves<sup>2</sup>. Then we wish we had kept the brush down, and cut the briars down! It's not too late. The love of God keeps us from becoming uncaring, neglectful or even abusive. Does a good parent, a good shepherd operate in anger?

No, far from it. The shepherd comforts that sheep, tenderly releases it from the briars. Speaks soothingly, strokes its head and then either carries or leads that sheep back to flock, or fold—rejoicing in the recovery and celebrating. See, the shepherd delights in, is well-pleased with his sheep. Just so, Father God delights in the Son. Just as he spoke from heaven over Jesus: **this is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased**. Jesus, of course, is the Son and the Good Shepherd *in this figure*, and we, make no mistake about it, are the lost, entangled sheep! He loves his sheep!

Christmas is *the arrival of the shepherd at the scene of the sheep's catastrophe*. It is about the arrival of the Son, born of Mary, in this world to find, rescue and restore all souls that were lost by sin, all in the briars of rebellion, unbelief and, yes, even enmity with God. Divine hospitality defused human hostility. However, the shepherd figure is incomplete—because although the Son does effect the rescue, he has done **more than merely restore**. He has come to destroy the briars so that no sheep will be tangled in them anymore! **We are freed when he frees us!** Remember those times of free movement, when, unentangled, you were allowed unimpeded progress (forgiven! free at last!). The way was clear, marked out and unobstructed? He has come to defeat Satan, defy death and destroy sin with all its entanglements—and done so. The briars will be destroyed either in the lake of fire, or by some other divine device in the last day. Christmas is the beginning of the end of our captivity. It is about the displacement of warfare with peace. It's about the abolition of evil and the cancelation of darkness and the uprooting of the briars. Christ is attentive to your catastrophe—because he delights in you, in us! While you wait, bleat like crazy. Activate the sonar of your desire and distress!

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<sup>2</sup> One shouldn't squander one's afflictions—out of pain can come great gain! In God's economy nothing is wasted.

Suffice it to say, the domestic life of Isaac (Gen. 27) is quite the “briar patch.” Yes, despite the splendid romantic bride-quest story that we started with, Hope Sunday, the first theme of Advent—since that day things have become overgrown, dangerously entangled. If you were here, December 1, you would recall that Eleazar was directed to Rebekah by God as “the one for Isaac.” And she was won by the promise of that man, his gentleness, wealth, prominence, nobility of character—he was a most wonderful husband candidate(!). Any sensible and spiritual girl would totally want such a husband—he was her dreams come true. Starry-eyed is easily dazzled.

So just why are there briars, anyway? Why do briars entangle sheep, like a Venus Flytrap!, if they don’t intend to eat them? Why couldn’t they be an alternative habitat for rabbits, squirrels and mice? Why couldn’t they just be visual scenery, or neutral boundary markers? Maybe it is because they are such *a perfect setting* for a divine *rescue* mission!

“Happily ever after” however, did not materialize. Twenty years of barrenness followed their idyllic courtship and marriage. So disappointing and painfully difficult. I am afraid, it may have embittered Rebekah—even scarred her<sup>3</sup>. And it evoked a cunning, scheming side in her! Her love for Isaac seems to have cooled, if not soured outright. She may have resented him for her childlessness. But, and this is a good thing, Isaac and Rebekah did not resort to any form of surrogacy—there was no side-marriage to any slave girl. No, we read that Isaac **prayed for his wife, God heard and Rebekah conceived**—from that conception came a difficult birth and *prenatal contention even*. She bore two sons and by the oracle of God she knew that **the elder was destined to serve the younger**. Perhaps it was natural for her to favor, the younger—just as it was natural for Isaac to favor the first-born. Thereby favoritism and envy found their way into the tent. So we have the briars of infertility, resentment, bitterness, disappointment, envy and strife—it is not hard to envision how the entrapment of sin was advanced in this small family. Yes, a small family in an enormous household! And everyone was stubbornly ambitious and willfully determined to serve himself. And favoritism was a really, really big sinful deal!

There is, In Isaac’s home, an evident need for relational maintenance: sympathy, lifting burdens, doing for and tending to each other—offices of comfort, blessing, correction, realignment, and recommitment! Be patient with and kind to one another—praying together, sharing, encourage, praising and honoring and improving. Even so small a thing as picking the place up can minister grace to the moment. Little gestures of appreciation and concern can go a long way in cementing the marriage bond.

The household kept Rebekah busy and the immense herds kept Isaac distracted—and then there was the constant strife, envy of neighbors, hostility over the land, the wells, the water—*not to mention the stress of many moves and relocations*. Scary threats of violence hung over their heads! The Philistines feared and hated Isaac’s

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<sup>3</sup> Such painful experiences can do lasting damage. They can provoke one to self-protective, self-serving and “controlling” (“No one will ever hurt me that way again!”) behaviors. She may have become adamant in “making things happen” her way. Thoughtful reflection might expose these stratagems as faithless, distrustful and unloving unbelief and led one to repentance and faith. “I will trust God” is healthier and there is a lot of love involved !

people—they were viewed as invasive, different, and there were too many of them (**you are too mighty for us**). They envied Isaac's blessings, successes and prosperity. Not the immediate family, mind you, but all the servants, maids and household members! (In the thousands, possibly.) Maybe they simply got too busy for each other and neglected the relationship—too much business and too little spousal time. ***They did not remain in that love for which God had formed them and brought them together!*** Of course, some of these are inferences, not tensions actually made explicit in the text.

And, whereas we read about Isaac's meekness, humility and lack of ferocity, we should note that qualities that carry with God do not necessarily bless the more carnally minded. Rebekah may have resented Isaac's passivity; she may have been into standing up for one's rights and thinking Isaac rather the fool, lost respect for him.

Wives respect your husbands is sound counsel from the word—  
everyone benefits!

It seems clear that she didn't trust his judgment. It almost seems as if she felt that protecting him from himself was necessary. Her job, so to speak, ***instead of just plain willful***. And the two of them, rather than dealing lovingly with these tensions, carry on as if everything were normal—with no need for adjustment, or change—as if everything were obvious, right and inevitable. The lack of self-awareness and the unwillingness to deal with hard things<sup>4</sup> seems rather apparent. They lived lives of mutual avoidance. When Isaac signaled that he intended to give the blessing of the first born to Esau, Rebekah thought Isaac was going against God and that she was the one to "right" the ark so to speak<sup>5</sup>. The will of God will certainly fail if I do not intervene. Now, the will is often a great hindrance and the conquest of our will is the principal work of God upon the individual soul! Whether the will of a stubborn Isaac, or of a scheming Rebekah! There would be generations of pain which, apart from these records, would make no sense: cunning, craftiness was familial in origin, both up and down the family line. Lying, deceit and scheming demonstrate the actual allegiances of Isaac's family members.

Chapter 27 has been labeled "the Blessing of Jacob by Isaac" but "the contest of wills between God, Isaac and Rebekah" is closer to the mark in terms of content. Or it could be "How to win in overruling your husband," the Rebekah plan. Envy spawns deceit, treachery and lies—and **favoritism** plays the spoiler in Isaac's house. Isaac was familiar with favoritism from his life-long tussles with Ishmael and favoritism was blatant

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<sup>4</sup> **Search me and know me . . . See if there be any evil way in me.** Psalm 139:4

<sup>5</sup> I am alluding to the incident in 2 Samuel 6:7, where Uzzah, a Judahite, and not an Levite reached out to steady the ark on its journey by ox cart to Jerusalem. He died instantly having offended God—unholy men should never handle holy things outside the way prescribed by God! Rebekah, a sinner, had no business interfering with the holy business of blessing the first born! She should have waited, trusted God and not gone all devious and treacherous. She was entangled with sinful willfulness and received mercy—instead of judgment. Rebekah's delusion that she was the one to fix this (God certainly can't) could be justified by Esau's choice of lousy wives, meaning she wasn't going to allow this to happen with Jacob. But Jacob didn't excel at his marriage choice (bigamy) and the unpleasantness of Esau's marriages transferred over to Jacob's marriage. There was enough unhappiness to go around—as we shall see.

in Isaac's own family. Familial ambition<sup>6</sup>(fueled by favoritism) would get extreme in the very next generation where complicated by polygamy (Jacob's two wives—Esau had several more wives!) stole everyone's peace and invited strife and turmoil. Where's the love? we ask. Absent. All the fond intimacy of the scene which engages all our five senses—where Isaac seeks to discover if Esau is really before him. **Come near and kiss me my son. So he came near** (meaning Jacob, the deceiver) **and kissed him.** (v.26) And Isaac **smelled the smell of his garments**—not Esau!!—**and he blessed him.** Isaac depended on the testimony of his senses, and they all failed him! The one he blessed was not Esau! Perhaps the garments of Esau which Jacob wore were scented with leaves, grass and aromatic herbs to put deer off the human scent—as hunters do to this day! But Isaac's eyes were too dim to make a visual check—still Jacob was skating on the brink of discovery! The subterfuge worked! Rebekah had indeed thought of everything—she defeated Isaac's distrust, and probable suspiciousness with an artful detour, she skirted the briars in Isaac, only to entangle herself in sin.

The household consisted of absolutely selfish and self-seeking individuals,  
each looking to game the others to his, or her advantage.  
No wonder there was strife

Isaac's household was a microcosm of the sin-sick and weary world. A foretaste of what things would be like when Joseph of a later time and his very expectant wife pulled into the city of David, for polling and taxes. You remember, the couple? There was not room for them at the inn—so they were housed in a stable and there the Christ child was born. And that child was the love of God incarnate . . . born to set his people free from sin. All who believe on him are forgiven, and saved, rescued and restored. Ah, God's love is the pure love that we celebrate at Christmas.

**There were shepherds in the fields, tending their flocks by night** and they came to see—and when they arrived they were met by the Great Shepherd, **wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.** There we see evidence of the Christmas kind of love, in which we are enjoined to remain!

**Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Unchecked ambition can lead to “winning at all costs” and that can spawn cheating, stacking the deck, and outright duplicity. All present and accounted for!