

I Spill Milk – You Spill Milk – We All Spill Milk

A prompting offered by Rev. Thomas Harry
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Genesis 25:19-34

And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddanaram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

John 13:1-5, 12-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the meal, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord...and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

This story tells us about the Hebrew family of destiny. This is Isaac, heralded son of Abraham and Sarah. This is the family of promise, the family out of which God will bring the people of Israel. These are the ancestors of Jesus, the family from which God will usher forth the salvation of the world! With all that pomp and circumstance, you'd expect from Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, a royal family, a model family. What the Bible gives us is nothing of the sort.

When we really look at the great biblical families, we discover the reality of what the Bible really says about family life. We discover this family, as with all families, is a far cry from perfect. It looks broken, wounded, and dysfunctional (as we say these days). This family looks kind of like your family and mine.

Rebekah and Isaac, like Abraham and Sarah, are barren. They try to conceive for 20 years. Isaac is an old man by fatherly standards at 60 years of age when God finally grants their deepest desire for children.

One would expect, after all the heartache and pain, God would grant them perfect children, children of destiny and promise! Destiny yes, but perfect they were not! The Bible says these boys were destined to be in conflict with one another! Even before their birth, Jacob and Esau struggle in their mother's womb.

Rebekah cries out, voicing the anguish of so many mothers who watch their children bicker and fight, saying, "Why is this happening to me?" (Gen 25:22), and the Lord gives her the news that all mothers so want to hear, "2 nations are in your womb, and 2 peoples, born of you, shall be separated" (Gen 25:23).

Jacob and Esau are tussling in the water of the womb. They're fighting when they come into the light. Then mother and father choose sides!! Isaac loved Esau; Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen 25:28). They're born in conflict and **remain** at odds: brokenness, discord, deception, pain, conflict - family realities, though not family values. What in the world is our God doing, choosing this family of all families to be the family of promise? And yet, one of the Bible's insights seen in this story of Jacob is that God chooses as God sees fit, from God's absolute freedom, uncontrolled by human expectations, however surely held.

Fast-forward to current times. It's the end of another long and hectic day in Seoul, Sydney, Dayton, Athens, or Cape Town. A family gets ready to sit down at the dinner table. The mother's just gotten home from work. The father finished a little early and has taken the chicken and kimchee out of the refrigerator. The 7-year-old helps set the table. The 2-year-old takes his accustomed seat. Hands are held; a hurried grace is said.

Just as the food's passed out, the 2-year-old, still learning to drink out of a glass, raises his glass, his hand slips, milk spills out all over the table and into mother's lap. She loses her temper for just a moment and rebukes her little boy. The father dashes for a towel to clean up the mess. The 7 year-old starts to laugh at her little brother. He sees the damage he's caused, hears his mother's raised voice, his sister's shrill laugh, and begins to cry.

By this time the father's quarantined the spillage. The mother has saved part of the casserole and both parents are trying to temper their older child, and calm the younger one. The towel is soaking up the milk - a typical family dinner.

Tom Mullen, professor at Earlham College, appropriately titled his collection of essays on family life, "Where 2 or 3 are Gathered, Someone Spills the Milk." And so it is! And this is not the exception; it's the norm! Parents explode. Children implode. Families break apart. Bill Ritter put it this way, "I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk."

Nobody wants this. Nobody intentionally sabotages family life, and yet on one level or another, this is the way families relate to one another. It's not that we don't love each other. We do love each other, and yet, why is it so hard to love those to whom we are closest? Isn't the greatest hope of family life that everyone will get along, that parents will love each other, and the children will be lifelong friends? Yet so often there's more pain than harmony, more conflict than peace.

At times we see glimpses of healing and reconciliation, words are taken back, actions are confessed and forgiven, brothers reunite. But even when the healing begins, some wounds are too raw, too deep; the damage is done. I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk.

The tragedy and the hope is that family life has always been this way. Cain gets jealous and rises up and kills Abel. Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. Jesus preaches and is thrown out of his own hometown. 2 sisters – Mary and Martha - squabble over chores when their Lord comes to visit. Siblings bicker over a favorite game. A 2-year-old spills a glass of milk. I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk.

We preachers wish we could tell you about our perfect childhoods and joyful family life, that we never crossed our parents or fought with our siblings, but that would not only be untruthful, it would be boring. Story from Lee Wiston: Joe Mills knelt at the altar rail for communion and prayed, "God, how can I dedicate my life more fully to you?"

"What about the peanut brittle?" flashed in his mind.

His family was in the custom each week of someone going to the store for a sweet treat, usually peanut brittle and passing it ceremonially around the family, as sweets generally were quite limited. No one was to dip into it alone. It was for everybody.

But Joe had fallen into the habit of considering himself “above the law”. After the kids were in bed Fri. night, he’d often make his way to the pantry and satisfy his sweet tooth. He’d pacify his conscience with “Well, who’s paid for this anyway?” or “Who made the rule in the first place?”

When Joe got up from the communion rail, he tried to think of something else, but the peanut brittle wouldn’t leave his mind. He figured now he was going to have to fess up after dinner.

It was surprising, how difficult it was for Joe to admit his crime to his teen-age sons and 10 year old daughter!

Silence followed his words and he felt very like a condemned prisoner. “Well, that’s the end of that”, he thought.

A few nights later Joe and his wife were watching TV when they heard sobs coming from Ruthie’s room.

Moving to her they found her with her head buried in the pillow, trying to stifle her sobs. Joe held her in his arms and soon she regained control.

“I’m a thief,” she sniffled. “What thief? What did you take, he asked? “The cake! The chocolate cake.” More tears.

The chocolate cake! Suddenly everything made sense.

Months before, on a Saturday morning, Mom had baked a large chocolate layer cake, iced it and put it on a plate in the frig. That evening the cake with plate was missing.

Both brothers denied knowledge with obvious sincerity. Little Ruth’s plea of innocence was most persuasive of all. “Mom, I know you’re trying to teach us to be good like Jesus, so I didn’t touch it either.”

The parents concluded it was another piece of mischief from Junior Markham, the “pest” who lived across the street. They chalked up one more black mark against that boy and considered the matter closed. And now, months later, here was Ruth admitting she’d taken the cake.

Ruthie sobbed out her story. She had wanted to give a party for her girlfriends, and she’d taken the cake and a bottle of ginger ale out of the frig. “Then I broke the plate and threw it away so I wouldn’t get caught.”

Fresh tears flowed and Ruth said, “I haven’t been able to say my prayers. I wanted all the time to tell you, but I was afraid if I did you wouldn’t love me any more. I decided if I waited until I was 21, we’d all laugh about it together.”

Looking at his daughter, Joe realized how much they were alike. He, too, found it difficult and costly to be honest. He, too, had been afraid he might not be loved – if people knew his faults and mistakes.

Joe kissed Ruth’s forehead and new love welled up inside him. “I stole things when I was your age, too, he told her. “Sometimes I even took money from my mother’s purse.” “Even now I have trouble being honest. Remember the peanut brittle?”

“Uh huh,” she said. “When you told us that, I knew I’d have to tell about the cake.”

No longer were Joe and Ruthie separated by age or status. The generation gap was bridged. They were 2 confessed thieves. But by mutual confession and by God’s forgiveness they had passed from the fellowship of sinners to the fellowship of saints. Once again as on Calvary 2000 years ago, Christ was there between 2 thieves.

The Bible’s full of tales of unhappy families, of dysfunctional families. And here is the good news for us who are a part of real human families. We live messy and complex lives, and we desperately need a God who’s willing to get messy. And this God of the Bible is just that kind of God. God willingly gets mixed up in the painful, everyday affairs of human life, wraps us in loving arms, tends to our wounds, and lifts us in love.

God’s grace is for our **brokenness** first of all!

This is the good news of the Bible. It tells stories about people like you and me, human beings, families with faults and flaws and lots of broken places. It's full of struggling families, full of wounds and bickering and wildcard children. The Bible tells the story of a God who delights in coming right in the midst of daily lives, right in the midst of our dinner table confrontations and disordered love, with grace, working to bring about healing, to lift us in love, even us who on a regular basis spill milk all over our lives.

Our God makes a habit of revealing love, of bringing about healing and new life, even when all seems lost. I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk.

When Jesus came to have his last meal with another holy dysfunctional "family", he sat around the table with his disciples, his brothers, and not only was Jesus present with them in the midst of their lives, offering his own brokenness, wounds, and impending death, he also brought to the table a towel, to make us whole, to clean up the mess.

All praise and thanks be to our savior God.