

The Gift of Difference

[Genesis 25:19-34](#)

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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Worship at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m.

As we hear your words, God, may your Holy Spirit teach us to bow and to bend so that we allow you to make things to right. Help us to hear the simplicity of your word in the complexity of our lives, to become more like Jesus the Christ in whom we pray. Amen.

Like many of you, I spent the evening of the fourth of July watching the fireworks over the Washington Monument: a colorful display, a very powerful reenactment of the bombs bursting in air. I couldn't help but notice after awhile though, that there was a distinct emphasis on the colors: white, gold and red. There seemed to be a certain absence of the color blue. I wondered if that was reflective of our current differences in the country.

Now I'm not too paranoid about those things, but I do find those rather interesting moments. We are in a country right now where difference is held high. We are told we are polarized, and we are going in opposite directions. And now that we are looking for a Supreme Court justice, we are told we are in for the battle of a lifetime.

Difference— it seems to be wearing out the country and the world. This particular text from the Old Testament and the lineage of God's work with the patriarchs is about how different Esau and Jacob are. They come from the same parents, the same womb, the same time. But they are dramatically different. And in that difference they spend a lifetime in struggle, not only with their own sense of identity before God, but a lifetime of struggle with each other and their families.

Difference inevitably leads to conflict. There's tension when differences exist. Sibling rivalry and family dysfunction tends to magnify all of that. It is an amazing thing. Not only are Jacob and Esau are struggling with each other, but there's an alignment of the parents to each one. Isaac loves Esau because he can go out and hunt for wonderful game with him. But Rebekah loves Jacob, doesn't say why, she just loves Jacob more.

Sometimes as parents we find ourselves in the quandary of loving one child over another, and trying to find balance that. It's an ancient difficulty. I was talking to someone recently who has twins, and they pointed out that there is always at least one twin that gets beat up in the womb: the weak twin. They can be identical but one comes out a little bent because of the struggle in the womb. Jacob and Esau are struggling to the point that Rebekah is not happy. She's wondering if she is going to be able to go full term because they are really at it. Whose's going to be first? Esau wins the battle and comes out first. But Jacob is not far behind by holding onto Esau's heel. In fact, their very names, Jacob and Esau, reflect the dissidence and difference. Esau, the hairy one. Jacob, the one who is the big heel, the supplanter, the one who wants to take over even when it doesn't belong to him. There's a lot of other differences. But those differences tend to become amplified in the life that they lead in the family in which they live.

Difference is God given, if there's anything that is clear in this text it is that God proclaimed through a promise that these two children were going to be significantly different. Do not believe for one moment that God wants everything to be peaceful, for everything to co-exist without tension. God creates difference and difference means tension, conflict, and struggle. God gives each person uniqueness and in that uniqueness when they are next to the person beside them, the difference resonates and sometimes gets amplified to the point where there's a battle. God permeates this story from the beginning, and it is all encompassed in prayer. When Rebekah's barren like Sarah was before her, there was only prayer. God had to provide. The human beings couldn't make it happen so God made it happen.

The answer to prayer brings the struggle. Do not believe that when God answers your prayer you're going to have peace and calmness and a life that's smooth. The very essence of the answer to prayer may take you to a place in the dissidence and struggle in life that just shows more and more differences with the world in which you live. And not just because God is absent — it's because God wants us to work through the differences. God wants to make sure that we grow because of difference.

Our two daughters are very different. It wasn't long in Tamara's growth, I think it was age four, she was advising her Mother on what kind of clothes to wear. Tamara works for a national clothes manufacturing and retail company. It wasn't long after Tanya was born that she was on her rocking horse and a little dowel came out of the head of the wooden rocking. She reached down and picked it up, looked at it and put it back in the hole. Engineering qualities came out early. Tamara was always aware of the story of things, and Tanya was always interested in how things were put together. As a child, she could make quicker sense out of electronic gadgetry than either one of her parents.

Uniquely different and gifted, this is the way God wants it to be. We live in a world of differences. Where sometimes it's genetics or family dynamics or how large a person is or what kind of racial or ethnic background. How beautiful a person is or how a person is built or how strong or weak they are. Differences are a reality of our life, and it's the way God made us to be.

When there's difference, there's also comparison. This is where the evil begins to take place in our lives, because we begin to judge one difference as better than another. Differences come about because not only is creation and genetics a part of the differences, but the way we nurture people along in the world creates difference. Then God seems to amplify the difference in this text by saying that Jacob is going to be the one who wins and Esau is going to be the one who loses. Why would God do that? Difference can have a tremendous impact in the world. In his best selling book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcom Gladwell talks about the difference between

Paul Revere and William Dawes. He talks about the importance of the kind of person who has gifts of connection. Both Dawes and Revere went riding out that fateful night to warn the people outside Boston that the British were coming. While Revere seemed to have the ability to wake everybody up and get everybody mobilized, Dawes seemed to go through the sleepy towns and leave them sleeper than when he left. Why was that? Gladwell goes on to say that it's because of the difference of their gifts. One had the tremendous social sense of connection and the other one seemed barely to know anybody out there.

Evil wants to eliminate difference. God creates differences but evil wants to put an end to them. Evil wants to somehow to make everything uniform. The word homogenous comes to mind. Don't like all that diversity and uniqueness, let's get everyone to look the same and talk the same, act the same. If we can just have a world full of Presbyterians and get rid of those Baptists and Methodists how much happier we'd be. We all know that's true. Evil wants to separate and ostracize difference. Eliminate it or conquer it and possess it. Win over it and hold it captive. Don't allow difference to co-exist.

I was in the development of a couples' Sunday School class when I was in Dallas, Texas, back in the eighties. When I gathered with those couples, we were trying to figure out the kind of Sunday School class we wanted to create and I asked them what kind of class they would you like. One of the fellows spoke up and said, "Well frankly I want to be with people who look me, talk like me, act like me and have my value system." We like that comfort of being with people who are like us. But, it's not the way God intended it to be. Homogeneity must ultimately give way to heterogeneity if we are going to live in God's plan. We must live with diversity and difference.

This past week we've read a lot about Sandra Day O'Connor and what a wonderful leader in the Supreme Court she's been, depending on your polarized view of reality. Well, let's just say she's been a successful Supreme Court justice. What did she have to face when she started out? She couldn't even get a job as a woman. She had to volunteer her time because no firm would hire her. There were no women in law at that time. We didn't tolerate the difference of women in any kind of leadership or management roles. Now we've come to understand that women have gifts as well, but at that time, we didn't like the difference. We've proven in our culture that difference is a good thing and that Supreme Court justices can be women.

It is important that we realize that this difference leads inevitably to some kind of conflict. Jesus throughout the New Testament doesn't want to put away difference; Jesus wants to embrace difference. Jesus wants us to face our conflicts and our disagreements. The very first teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount is about how to build a bridge with someone you disagree with. Don't let anger control your differences. Conflict is normal. If you believe becoming a Christian or following Jesus Christ will eliminate conflict in your life, take a look at this text. Being a person of faith and offering prayers leads to one of the most profound conflicts in all of history. God answers the prayer of both Isaac and Rebekah with a major conflict of their two children. What an answer to prayer! Lord, are you sure you heard my prayer right?

Things have gotten tougher and worse because of the differences. Worship wars, gender wars, ideological wars, theological wars. All because we have differences of opinions and differences of perspective. What sin and evil wants to take are those differences and amplify them. Evil wants to twist those so we do not resolve our differences or find ways to work together. Evil wants to increase the hostility and magnify the anger because of differences. Jesus' New Testament pattern was to face the differences and master the anger: don't give in to the pattern or the temptation to allow difference to take you into revenge and rage.

It's important that we learn to deal with difference and not let them divide us. This text clearly points out that differences is not only a result of what God creates and what human beings do in the formation of the culture, but what God ultimately magnifies and redeems. God does something special with the difference between Esau and Jacob. Yes, Esau is not the one who receives the promise and goes on into the future as one of the patriarchs. Jacob is the one. Unlikely as he is, because Jacob is the one who is constantly planning the undoing of his brother. He's manipulative; he's coercive; he's even vindictive at times. It seems conflict follows Jacob like a cloud that rains on him all the time. And this is God's chosen person. Well, the reason is that God will take all of that dissonance in Jacob and transform it to something powerful. God sometimes gives us the gift of difference in conflict because God wants to give us the opportunity to see what can come out of it in such a magnificent completion. So God intensifies the difference.

Differences are redeemed by God. When a husband and wife are together for a long period of time, they begin to see the patterns of life with which they could begin to wear each other out. They can appeal to the Holy Spirit to come into their relationship and help them not just tolerate each other but actually build bridges and be helpful to each other. They could become a team that works together with differences. Teamwork, collaboration, interdependence, all because people have different gifts, and they are willing to be together.

The New Testament takes this story of Jacob and Esau and turns it into some very particular solutions of why God redeems. The book of Romans amplifies the perspective that God has the freedom to turn the world upside down. The natural pattern of things is that Esau is the firstborn child and should have the inheritance, but Jacob, the second born, is the one God chooses.

God can turn all of our value systems upside down and make the weak from strong one: the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In Hebrews the emphasis on Jacob and Esau has to do with the understanding that Jacob seemed to have more patience than Esau. Esau got hungry and needed to eat, and Jacob played on it. Jacob seemed to be able draw out his postponement in order to win the best that God had, but Esau seemed to need it right now.

Difference is something God can work out to our benefit if we are willing to live into what God has in mind. Differences, if we live with them long enough and work with them, can lead to maturity. In his book, *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman argues the case that God gives us the freedom to be different, and it is our responsibility to assert our difference and be well self-differentiated. And when we are, because of God's gifts in our lives, we're able to work together not because we become like each other but, because we are willing to be different.

Jesus, himself, met people where they were and embraced them in their difference. It is important that we see that God's movement

is to reconcile differences. To help people work together, to help gifts come together and to multiply and amplify so that the world becomes a better place because people of differences are doing common work.

Jesus Christ came to make sure that Jacob and Esau did not stay divorced. The end of the story is that they are not enemies forever. The end of the story of Jacob and Esau is that they came together in forgiveness and love embrace. They could co-exist; they could work together; they could be beside each other without building wars. And that's what God has in mind for the future—that we can be people beside each other without fighting. We can be churches beside each other without dissonance. We can be nations that have different perspectives beside each and working together, different. Diversity in the pattern of God is inevitably leading to some form of unity in the future. And that's why Jesus came, not to make us all the same, but to help us learn to be ourselves and different and be together without hurting each other.

This past week we've seen that Billy Graham completed his last crusade. Fifty-six years of crusade life. Newsweek said that made Billy Graham so unique was that he was very definitive on his commitment to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, but he was able to co-exist with people who had differences and embrace them even though he was very clear about where he stood in Jesus Christ. That's where Christians need to be. Articulate and well differentiated about who we are, and what we believe, but not condemning or judging in eliminating other people in their views. God is eventually the judge of what differences prevail. In the meantime, we are called by Jacob and Esau to find a way by the Grace of God not just to tolerate each other but to engage each other in significant depth of mutual commitments in our differences.

Let us pray. Gracious God, your Holy Spirit is coming alongside us even today in our common humanity to give us the freedom to be unique individuals with unique gifts. We ask that you would provide that same pattern among nations and peoples in the world. May we not allow evil to try to subjugate or control or eliminate people who are different. Let us find a way to live in reconciliation and peace and be very different. We pray this to the presence of Jesus the Christ who came to break down all the walls that divide us and help us to work together in our differences. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.