



Proper 17, Year A – July 24, 2011

Genesis 29.15-28

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

Oh, the delicious irony! Because, you see, Jacob had it coming. For this is Jacob, the conniving little weasel who tricked his elder twin Esau into giving up his birthright. The is Jacob, who then disguised himself as Esau to deceive their old and blind father into giving him, Jacob, the blessing which belonged to the eldest. His uncle Laban is obviously no saint (this seems to have run in the family), but what could be more fitting a penance than for Jacob to be hoodwinked on the very same matter of the rights of the first born? The deceiver has been deceived!¹ Apparently, what goes around comes around.

This is of course a truism, and it is expressed in any number of aphorisms. Jesus put it this way in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Peter pulled out his sword and sliced off the ear of the high priest's slave, "Put your sword away, for those who live by the sword will perish by the sword." Or as some would have it, evil begets evil.

What we have identified here is the propensity for violence and animosity to "cycle." All it takes is one person to drop the gauntlet, and one person to pick it up, and we're off.

I had a dog like that. She was a headstrong Kerry Blue Terrier. Talkative, too. I would turn to her, and say, Myra you stop your barking right this minute. And she'd look at me, and go "Woof." "I mean it," I'd say. "You sit and be quiet." And she would. Then I'd turn my back to head out of the room, and I'd hear "Woof." That dog just couldn't let anybody else have the last word!

Now it's cute and mostly harmless when it comes to dogs. But we aren't dogs, and the hostilities we bear towards one another, our little list of righteous indignations, the resentments and grudges, are capable of doing very great harm indeed, are capable of alienating and isolating us from co-workers, neighbours, friends, even family.

Think for example, of the way gang-violence works. One gang takes offence at something another gang has done, and come hell or high water, they are going to have their pound of flesh – and we're not talking about anything as civilized as simple retaliation – let's say, an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. Which means that the level of violence escalates repeatedly, until finally we have innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire of drive-by shootings.

To bring it down a notch – but the dynamic is no different – let's consider litigation. I have had the unhappy misfortune of needing to learn the rules of play in this nasty-making game, and I can tell you without reservation that it has every capacity to turn you into a person you really don't want to be. And this is because litigation launches an all-consuming cycle of claims and counterclaims, overstatement and over-reaction to overstatement which does not stop (indeed you *cannot* get off this merry-go-round) until one person wins and the other loses, or

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections" in Keck, Leander E., Convener, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. I, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 553

both decide this is just stupid, and they settle (generally meaning neither one ends up happy).

Let's bring it down another notch – I'm guessing to the level which is most common, and which causes the most of us the most pain – that is, to our families. How desperately we want our families to "work." And yet, there is hardly a family anywhere untouched by some kind of feuding or stand-off. In my family, the "great breach" coalesced over the now iconic Ice Storm of 1998 in Eastern Ontario. My sister, the Safety Officer, did not approve of the safety precautions being taken by our father, with whom she and her son had sought refuge. She flounced out in high dudgeon. He, meanwhile, wasn't too keen on being "instructed" by someone half his age, or having his expansive hospitality rejected; and basically, they never spoke amicably again. When I called to say my sister had cancer, my father's response was, "Is this is a joke?" And when our father died, my sister (albeit ill) declined to attend the funeral.

My dear people, this is crazy. You know how it works. After not so very long (a few months, maybe?), no one can really even remember the specifics of the originating offence. But by cracky, they all manage to keep it alive. Any new infraction, no matter how small, is added to the account of the transgressor – just proving how right everybody is to be mad at everybody else.

What goes around comes around. Evil begets evil. Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword.

Except, my friends, this is neither the message nor the content of the Christian gospel. Indeed, if anything, the teaching and dying of Jesus stand in direct contrast to the cycling of hatred and violence. They stand as an antidote to the escalation of hostility. For what Jesus does, when confronted with lies, is refuse to take the bait. What Jesus does, when confronted with violence, is refuse to fight back. What Jesus does, when confronted with abandonment, and thirst, is to ensure that his mother will not be alone, or without food or drink; what Jesus does when confronted with condemnation is to forgive.

Martin Luther King, the celebrated civil rights activist, once said, "Hate begets hate, violence begets violence, toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love... Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate [our opponents], but to win their friendship and understanding."²

What King aimed to do, what Jesus teaches us, is to stop the cycle. What is so almighty important about having the last word? (Even if you're right.) Jesus asks us, by his example, Why don't you just stop? Leave the gauntlet where it lies, and say, "This fight stops right here, right now, and it stops with me."

Perhaps you will point out that Jesus came to a rather violent end, on account of his refusal to fight back. So did King. So did Ghandi. And yes, it might cost us something – if only our pride. But I remind you that, ultimately, in refusing to meet hatred with hatred, and violence with violence, all three emerged the undisputed victor and hero, and their worlds were powerfully changed by their apparent show of weakness.

It is small wonder, really, that Jacob should find himself at the receiving end of his own despicable mendacity. For what goes around comes around.

² Martin Luther King, Speech in 1958

It's up to us whether the cycle continues, or stops.

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