

Father Abraham Had Many Sons (And Daughters):

Rebekah: Well Behaved Women ...

Dr. Tom Pace

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Genesis 24:16b-20; 27:11-13

She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar." "Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. Genesis 24:16-20

But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me." Genesis 27:11-13 (NRSV)

Let us pray. *Gracious God open us up today for what your word has for us. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and open up our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

In a letter dated March 31, 1776 Abigail Adams is at the family farm in Braintree, Massachusetts and she is writing to her husband John Adams who is at the Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia. She says, "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire that you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation." You go, Abigail!

We're talking about this period of the patriarchs. There's a little family tree in your Sermon Notes to try and help you keep everyone straight. We talked about Abraham and his wife Sarah and Hagar the maid by whom Ishmael was born and Isaac born from Sarah. We talked about Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was an important player in all of this saga. And today I want to look at Rebekah and not so much Isaac. Here's what's so interesting. This period about patriarchs is about matriarchs, too.

Isaac has a very passive role in this whole story. Isaac plays the part when Abraham takes him to be sacrificed on Mt. Moriah, where God provides the ram, but he plays no real part in that other than be taken by his father. Then here in this part where the blessing is passed on to Jacob instead of to Esau, Isaac is sort of a passive one, too. Rebekah is the one who makes it all happen.

You have probably heard the phrase, and it's been attributed to many people, "well behaved women rarely make history." My wife has a shirt that says, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." You have to think about that a little while but it's actually pretty good. Well-behaved women rarely make history – that is really the point of today's message, and it's not really just about women. You might say that "well behaved people rarely make history." Sometimes you have to misbehave a little bit; you have to do something that's going to shake things up.

What I want us to do today is to learn from Rebekah what she did and how we can be used by God to achieve God's purposes. Let's see what we can learn.

First, Rebekah exceeds expectations. This whole story of the camels seems sort of a fun little story, but here's the truth. If I show up and you come and offer me a drink, that's appropriate, a social custom to offer a drink to a traveler and the traveler accepts the drink. That's all well. But a camel drinks 20 to 30 gallons. Ten camels. It says specifically, "I will draw for your camels also until they have finished drinking." So with her jar she goes back and forth to the well, a jar at a time. 200 gallons. Then she says, "Hey, you can come stay at our house, too. Why don't you just come spend the night at our house?"

Look, the customary thing to do would have been to just offer a drink. Here's what I would tell you – she's clearly one who goes above and beyond. If you just want to get through the day, meet expectations, if you want to just keep it upright, just meet expectations, do what's

customary. But if you want to make a change in somebody's life, in your own, in the world, you've got to go beyond what's expected.

Some of you may remember Theo. Remember him? He was a member of our congregation – he was here most Sundays for quite a while. We believed he was homeless. He carried a backpack and made people nervous because he carried a backpack. He'd come in to worship and sit and stay for a little while, then he'd get up and wander off. He'd charge his cell phone here. The ushers realized that the backpack made people nervous, so we asked if he would leave it in the usher's closet. He was willing to do that. What I really liked was that when people saw Theo around, they would say, "Good morning, Theo." After a while people started to know him and he became a part of our community. People treated him with dignity and respect. We asked him, "Why do you keep coming back to St. Luke's?" He wasn't asking for money, or panhandling. So we'd ask, "Why do you keep coming back to St. Luke's?" And he said, "People treat me nicely here." I was really proud.

But, friends, that's just meeting expectations. Some of our folks said, "Let's take him to lunch." So they'd do that. Some folks asked, "What can we do for you?" Some folks suggested maybe they could help him get a job. They arranged for some interviews and while that didn't work out, they continued to try and say, "Hey, it's just not enough for me to look him in the eye and call him by name. No, we need to go beyond if we really want to make a difference in somebody's life." To not just say, "I'm going to just go up to the edge," If you want to keep the boat afloat, just keep meeting explanations. But if we want to make a difference in the world around us you have to go beyond that. You have to water the camels, too.

Here's the second thing. Rebekah is willing to upend, to upset the social order of the day.

A number of years ago I was in an airport lounge, waiting on my flight in the arrival lounge. The plane was late, and the place was packed. Everybody was a little annoyed – you know the drill - you've been there. I was reading a book and working on my sermon and such and it was a religious book. I can't remember what it was, but the lady sitting next to me saw that I was reading a Christian book and began to talk to me about that. I have to admit I was just barely meeting expectations in terms of my conversation with her. She found out I was a pastor and that was all great.

Well, also in the lounge there was a family with three children that were banshees. They were crazy. They were running everywhere; they were climbing up on the chairs and jumping off. They knocked one guy's coffee over. One of them grabbed one of the carry-ons and was pulling it. It wasn't his, but he was fooling around with it. His mother had her earbuds in and seemed oblivious. I assume that by then she'd learned that was the best way to survive.

So everybody in the lounge was really annoyed with these kids. The lady sitting next to me said, "You know, that mom needs to take those kids to church so they can learn some manners." And I thought to myself, "That's what a lot of people think church is for, is to teach people manners." Another social institution to keep people in line. To have people meet the expectations of the community around them.

And I began to think, "I've been a part of that, too. Teaching people that."

The truth is the Scripture tells us what we're trying to do is to teach people not to listen to the way of the world around them, but to tune themselves into the voice of God. To tell them, "This is how you're supposed to live. This is how you live."

The Christian faith is a countercultural movement. Not a movement to move people into the culture.

This story about Rebekah, when you begin to think of it that way, you begin to get it. So why would she lie to her husband, deceive him, sort of orchestrate this whole charade so that Jacob would get the blessing instead of Esau? Why would she be willing to do that?

You have to understand that the social order of the day was that the older son would have the rights and responsibilities of the family. It had been that way for generations, but she so clearly heard God say, "Hey, the elder will serve the younger. The younger will be the one through whom the blessing and birthright are passed. The blessing that was given to Abraham and now Isaac and now Jacob and Joseph, that it will come through the younger, not through the older." The social order would be turned on its head.

Now we have to be really careful because for centuries the church has often decided that we would do the wrong thing and justify it in the name of Jesus, do some terrible things in the name of Jesus. We have to be really, really careful about that. So you can also learn a negative lesson from watching Rebekah.

But in this case, I think the point is that she could so clearly hear God's voice saying that this is what was supposed to happen, that she was going to do what needed to be done in order that it would come to pass. She upset the social order.

It upset the social order when in December 1773 the Sons of Liberty disguised as Native Americans went on the boat and threw the tea belonging to the East India Tea Company into Boston harbor. Was it right? Was it legal? I don't know. But they felt it was what needed to be done.

It upset the social order when Henry David Thoreau in 1846 refused to pay a poll tax and they threw him in jail. Some suggested that he was protesting the Mexican-American war, but here's what he writes in his book *Walden* about why he did it. "I did not pay a tax to or recognize the authority of the state which buys and sells men, women, and children like cattle at the door of its senate house." He was against slavery. The legend is that his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him in jail. He asked, "Henry, why are you here?" Thoreau answered, "Ralph, why are you *not* here? Why are you going along to get along with this terrible thing?"

It upset the social order when in June 1969 a group of people from a hotel bar in Manhattan refused to accept the police raid and fought back against them because it was still at that time illegal to be gay.

It upset the social order when Rosa Parks sat in the front seat of the bus.

It upsets the social order when a woman sues her company because there's a "good ol' boy" network and the "good ol' boys" always get the promotions.

Nobody likes that - it upsets people. It upset the social order when Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. Because the Catholic Church was selling indulgences to forgive sins. If you just give them enough money – any sin could be forgiven.

It upset the social order when John Wesley refused to acknowledge the boundaries of parishes and began to preach evangelical messages. He said, "The world is my parish. I'm not going to abide by the parish boundaries of the church." And furthermore, he let lay people preach – of all things. How horrible – to let you all actually proclaim the word! So they banned him from the churches of England.

It upset the social order when the prophet Amos said to the people of Judah, “On behalf of God I hate, I despise your solemn feasts. I take no delight in your religious assemblies. The aroma of your offerings is like a stench to God. So let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

It upset the social order when Jesus said to the Pharisees: “You are like ravenous wolves, vicious wolves instead of shepherds protecting your sheep.”

It upset the social order when he went into the temple and turned over the tables of people selling sacrificial animals.

Look, we live here because people before us were willing to ruffle feathers and turn over tables and upset apple carts and make trouble. Just make trouble.

I don’t believe it’s the case that each time you scream really loud you’re accomplishing something. I don’t think that’s the case. It takes people who are willing not to just tear down but to build up, to build structures, to create solutions for things. But the truth is that the inertia is so strong that at some point someone has to upset the social order.

When Jesus is to be born, Mary sings the song we love to sing at Christmas with a romantic spirit. It’s called *The Magnificat* and in there she says, “He will bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the poor and lowly.” They did not crucify Jesus because he told people to love one another. It was because they said, “Hey, we’re in charge here. And you’re calling yourself a king of a new kingdom.”

Rebekah did what she needed to do even though it was going to upset the social order because she could so clearly hear God’s voice.

It’s so funny looking back at all these things. We can look back and say, “You know, it’s so clear what was right.” But in the midst of it – even in the middle of the Revolutionary War right there so many people in the colonies were asking, “What are we doing?” “We can’t fight this kind of war –this is wrong.” In the midst of all these issues it was so fuzzy except for these people for whom it was so clear in their minds that they were willing to do what needed to be done.

She was willing to upset the social order.

Here's the last thing we can learn from Rebekah. She was willing to take the risk, to take the heat, to pay the price. She makes a powerful statement, "Let the curse be on me, my son." She was saying, "I'll pay the price." And indeed she did. She never saw her son again. Jacob was able to pass the blessing on, but she was never able to see her son again.

You know, it takes courage to be willing to say, "I'm going to step out there. I'm going to do what needs to be done."

For just a minute I want you to think smaller. Not think about the big social life-changing issues. I want you to think about your own family, and what might be a step of courage for you into these moments. Here's an example: Is there an issue in your family that just needs to be addressed but no one wants to address it? No one wants to talk about it, they just want to go along to get along. There is the thought, "Let's just keep going. Please don't everyone get upset. Can't we just go on along?" And someone has to say, "No, let's talk about this. Let's deal with this, because it's not right where we are right now. This isn't the way families work together in the name of Jesus." But instead, the social order is just going to go along. What would the step of courage be into that place, into that moment?

What about in the way you spend your money, in how your financial life works? Maybe it's the case that you just keep building up debt and keep building up debt, but you keep living in the same lifestyle you've been living at. Someone has to say, "Hey, we can't keep doing this." But the inertia is that we just keep getting another credit card or something.

Maybe in your workplace there are things going on that are wrong, and you think, "Look, I'm just going to stay in my lane and do my job. I'm not going to worry about all these things going on. I'm not going to make waves; I'm not going to ruffle feathers. I'm not going to make trouble; I don't want to be a trouble maker." Maybe a step of courage would be to say, "I'm going to deal with this. I'm going to speak up."

What might the step of courage for you be? To be willing to take the risk. To be willing to take the responsibility and do what needs to be done.

I am so grateful, God, on this weekend. I'm so grateful for all those who've gone before us, who exceeded expectations, who watered the camels, too. Who were willing to upset the social order, ruffle feathers, make trouble. Who were willing to pay the price – sometimes the ultimate price so that what was wrong might be put right again. I want a little of that, a little of that

courage so at least in my own little world I might have the wherewithal and the courage to do what needs to be done.

Let's pray. *Gracious God, we are so grateful, so grateful for women and men who have made history because they weren't so well behaved. Because they were willing to ruffle feathers, upset people. God, forgive us when we're too afraid. Give us the courage to step out and do what needs to be done. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*