

Ab Uno Multis (From One, Many)

07.12.26 -- Genesis 25: 19-34

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“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided...” Vs. 23

For most of my life I believed that when people referred to “brothers fighting against brothers” in the Civil War, they were using the word “brother” as a metaphor for “countryman.” Turns out, that was not always the case.

Brothers James and Alexander Campbell emigrated to the United States from Scotland in the 1850s. James set himself up as a drayman and clerk in Charleston, and Alexander found work as a stonemason in New York, occasionally joining his brother to work in Charleston in the winters. Both joined local militia companies and were swept onto opposite sides when the Civil War broke out. Records show that even though they fought on opposite sides, they kept up a relatively amicable correspondence throughout the war.

It was over control of Charleston, S.C., that the two brothers very nearly met in combat. The Battle of Secessionville was the Union’s attempt to retake Charleston. In the first attack on Fort Lamar, Alexander—as Color Sergeant of the 79th Highlanders—stormed the parapet and placed the Union flag there, holding his position in the face of prolonged musket and cannon fire until ordered to withdraw. James was among the defenders and stiffened Confederate resolve at a critical time by mounting the parapet unarmed and hurling a log into advancing Union troops.

Sometime after the battle, which was won by the Confederacy, James wrote his brother: “I was astonished to hear from the prisoners that you was color Bearer of the Regmt that assaulted the Battery at this point the other day.” He also said that if they met again, “you have but to discharge your duty to your cause for I can assure you I will strive to discharge my duty to my country and my cause.”

Some historians now tell us that, not since that tragic and heartbreaking time in America’s history, has the nation been so divided...until now.

Every American knows, or should know, the motto of the United States of America: *E Pluribus Unum*; out of many, one. But lately, it has seemed that the opposite may, in fact, be the case: *Ab Uno Multis*; from one, many. It feels like, more and more, we are living not so much in the United States of America as in the Divided States of America.

The divide between conservative and progressive has become a rent in the very fabric of our nation. Unable to agree on even the smallest points, our Congress sits idle, our president is incapable of passing promised legislation except by fiat and executive order, and even in local governments and school board meetings, business often dissolves into shouting matches.

Compromise is considered a sign of weakness. We come into what was supposed to be a discussion with our minds made up, unwilling to move even a millimeter toward the other side, and nowhere is this more evident than in the increasing number of trials that are ending in mistrial because juries can't come to agreement.

It often seems as though division, disagreement, separation, and estrangement have become our default settings.

And because Scripture has a way of holding up a mirror to us, one cannot help thinking of our own state of separation and estrangement when we read of the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, in today's reading from the book of Genesis.

BORN DIVIDED

Even before they were born, they struggled against each other in the womb, as though division itself had taken up residence before either of them had drawn a breath. And as they emerged on the day of their birth, their struggle continued, Jacob holding onto Esau's heel as if trying to hold him back so he could be the oldest. Esau was an outdoorsman, hunting and fishing and bringing to the table the wild meat he had taken in the wilderness. Jacob preferred to hang around the house. Esau was his father's favorite; Jacob was his mother's. Esau was passionate, emotional, and forthright about his feelings and desires. Jacob was sneaky and deceptive, traits he apparently learned from his mother.

It was through deception that he and his mother managed to secure for Jacob the birthright usually reserved for the older son. And it was because of this deception that Esau vowed to kill him. The family fracture became a life-threatening wound. Afraid for his life, his mother, Rebekah, arranged for Jacob to go to Haran, north of Syria, and live with her brother, Laban, and find a wife there, among Laban's daughters. There, in his Uncle Laban, Jacob would meet his match in the area of deception and sneakiness. The deceiver, it turns out, would be much deceived.

Jacob met Rachel almost immediately when he arrived in Haran. She was petite, cute, sassy, and Jacob was smitten. They courted for a while until Jacob got up the courage to ask her father, Laban, for her hand in marriage. Laban agreed, if Jacob would agree to work for him for seven years. Jacob agreed, and the wedding feast was announced. At the feast, Jacob got drunk and went into the wedding tent, where he and his bride consummated their union. Only when he woke up in the morning did he discover that it was not the beautiful Rachel to whom he was married, but her smart, though rather plain, older sister Leah.

Laban readily admitted to the subterfuge. "I thought you knew," he said. "In this country the younger daughter cannot get married until the older daughter is married. But don't be sad. Now you and Rachel are free to be wed. But it's going to cost you another seven years

working for me.” Jacob was still so smitten with Rachel that he agreed, and he spent the next fourteen years working for that lying, scheming father-in-law of his.

Years later, Jacob’s family had grown considerably, what with having two wives and all, and he decided to take his huge family south, back to Canaan, the land of his parents and ancestors. But to get there, he had to pass through Seir, or Edom, where his brother, Esau, was known to be wealthy and powerful. Afraid that Esau might still be angry with him, Jacob sent a delegation with gifts to greet Esau, but his fears were unfounded.

Esau arrived at the head of 400 men, but he was not there to attack. He dismounted, ran to his brother, embraced him, and wept with joy at seeing him. In that moment, the story turns—not because the past has been erased, but because grace has interrupted it. The 400 men had been brought to escort them safely to Seir as Esau’s guests. Jacob demurred, using as an excuse the slowness of his caravan, given the young age of his grandchildren and the pregnancy of his livestock. He promised to come back at a later date, a promise which, according to the biblical record, he never kept.

The only other time they will be together is when they weep together at their father’s funeral. Even reconciliation, it seems, may leave unfinished business behind.

WHY CAN’T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Why can’t we all just get along?

Rodney King’s question seemed simplistic and naïve when he first uttered it in the midst of the riots in Los Angeles. But it has become a lament for our time.

Why can’t we all just get along?

Is it our destiny to strive mightily against one another like Jacob and Esau? Or is it a choice that we make, standing one against the other, refusing to budge or to consider moving even a hair’s breadth from our position? Are we destined to sink into the mire of history, unwilling and unable to reach out and help each other solve the problems that threaten to swallow us? Or might God still be calling us to something better than permanent estrangement?

What was it that healed Esau’s wounds so he could embrace his brother? What opened the door wide enough for grace to walk through?

Some say that, since he became a success in his own right, he had nothing to lose in doing so.

Others offer that he had the upper hand (400 men), a position from which forgiveness comes more easily.

But others point out that the healing agent may have been time. As we age, we tend to back away from specific events in our lives, whether they be pleasant or hurtful, and become more cognizant of the big picture. We see the slight that was made yesterday, but we also see the joys of the distant past.

No doubt, from his vantage point of success, power, physical distance, **and time**, Esau was able to remember not just the deception and guile of his younger brother, but also the love and joy that they had shared as children and youth; and it was this latter perspective through which he chose to greet Jacob as he crossed through Edom. He chose to see more than the wound. He chose to see his brother.

Which brings me from Genesis to my own family. My younger brother, Scot—one “t”—and I could not have been more different politically. I am a “Bernie Sanders liberal,” and he was a “MAGA conservative.” We battled mightily on Facebook.

And we played golf together, dined out together with our wives, sat together at wedding receptions, went to Reds games together, and wept together at family funerals. People would ask, “How is this possible?” Well, until Scot died, a victim of Covid and sepsis, we were brothers. We had a long history together. We saw each other through great joys and great sorrows, backbreaking challenges and celebrative victories. And when we were together, it was those things we chose to remember.

On the bookshelf in our living room, I have a photograph that was taken in our backyard when I was five years old and Scot was three. We are both wearing cowboy hats and six-guns in holsters that are so heavy they are threatening to pull down our pants. We are shoulder to shoulder and smiling shy smiles.

It is that image, and a thousand more like it that I carry in my head, that allowed us to love each other and get along when we needed to: the image of ourselves as brothers, before we were ever anything else.

Perhaps, if we are ever to wade out of the bog we have found ourselves stuck in as a nation, it will be because we have managed to create such a picture in our own heads: of liberals and conservatives, American brothers and sisters, looking together in the same direction and smiling. Perhaps it will be because we remember that before we are opponents, before we are voters, before we are labels and slogans and talking points, we are brothers and sisters, children of God, bound to one another by a grace deeper than our divisions.

AMEN