

Jacob Have I Loved

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Genesis 27: 1-38

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Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities for the mentally challenged died in early May of this year at the age of 90. His passing was little noticed in much of the world, but *The Economist* newsmagazine in Britain took note, and told his story in its weekly obituary.*

In a small village north of Paris, in the early 1960s, at the urging of his spiritual director who was also the chaplain at a mental institution in the village, Vanier paid a visit to the asylum's inmates. I say inmates, because it was clear they were neither patients nor clients. The inhabitants of the asylum existed in a sort of twilight world of maltreatment and neglect. The asylum was suffused with sadness. But, somehow, in the faces of these discarded people Vanier discerned something other than sadness. He saw beauty, joy, laughter, longing, and, most importantly, he saw love.

These qualities among the inmates kept bringing him back until, one day, he discerned his calling. He came to believe that God wanted him to provide a better place for them to live together, a place of safety, love and laughter, a home, a family, for these men and women and children who had been locked away and forgotten by society for their "crime" of mental illness and mental incapacity.

The first two members of his new family were Raphael and Philippe. Raphael was a young man damaged by a childhood bout with meningitis. From time to time he would fall into fits of rage. Raphael knew only twenty words. Philippe was wounded in mind and body, with a paralyzed leg he dragged behind him and a withered arm. He repeated himself again and again and again.

These young men had been rejected by their own families. It would be easy to imagine that God also did not love them, had rejected them too. But Vanier saw things differently. He did not worship at the altar of a god who discards the broken. He worshiped the God of love who recovers that which society would dispose of. He saw love in each of these young men - and the hundreds more injured people he rescued from the scrapheaps of our "civilized" world. He saw in them the love of God, the very essence of the image of God.

And so he established his homes throughout the world, each one with the vision that the rejected people who lived there had more to teach us than anyone else. And one of the greatest lessons they taught, according to him, was the lesson of love. These neglected and despised people wanted to love and be loved.

Our biblical story today tells one of the most savage and pitiable stories of all, the story of two brothers, one who connives to gain advantage and favor at every turn, the other who is cheated out of everything he valued. Twin brothers locked in a life-long struggle. The legend tells the

story of a mother who aids and abets the conniver, and of an aged father who gets the wool pulled over his eyes.

At the climax of the story, Esau, the cheated brother, after losing his father's blessing to his dishonest twin, cries out: *"Father, have you but one blessing to give? Are you rejecting me too, Father?"*

Poor old Isaac has been duped into emptying his reservoir of blessings, pouring them all out on that scoundrel Jacob. And now Esau, the son Isaac always loved more, had to depart into the world, and soon aged Isaac would depart from this world with this question grating on their hearts: *"Father, have you no blessing left for me?"***

How much tragedy in this world comes from want of love! To be told, *"You are unworthy to be loved"* or *"Your love is unwanted."* This, it seems to me, is the ultimate transgression against another human being. And it is the transgression that continues its curse from generation to generation until someone who has been loved insufficiently breaks the chain and chooses a love undeserved and unearned that rescues us all from oblivion.

We mindlessly sow curses to the wind, and we reap the tempest as our inheritance. A child here, a family there, a class or a race here, a whole nation there: civilized society acts as though it is quite normal, quite natural, really, to discard people, to un-love.

Even Saint Paul in his most Pauline of all New Testament letters, the Epistle to the Romans, refers back to the tragedy of Jacob and Esau to justify his own doctrine of God's sovereignty, God's absolute right to elect from all eternity "this" random person for salvation and "that" random person for damnation. Saint Paul takes the tragedy of Jacob's elevation above his brother - an elevation that Genesis never even tries to justify - and Paul uses it to justify his own theology by placing in the Lord God's mouth the words, *"Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated."* And in doing this, Paul the great apostle and theological genius has gotten it catastrophically wrong. How could the author of the great love chapter of First Corinthians miss this? He is human. Even Paul.

But Jean Vanier understood what the Apostle Paul didn't on this occasion. God is not a diabolical puppet master. God is love. And God loves all that God has made.

Vanier's eulogist said of the men and women and children he gathered into his communities: *"Their families and the world had abandoned them. They cried out to be looked on with kindness, called by their name, not despised, but loved. He already knew they would return that love, for he felt it whenever he was among them. And to love was to be with God."*

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*The Economist, May 18, 2019, p. 82.

**Elie Wiesel retells this story eloquently in the context of telling of the meeting again of these brothers years later, a story we will visit next week. Elie Wiesel, *"Messengers of God"* (New York, 1976), pp. 131-132.