



This morning we're finishing our series called, "Building a Home: One Room at a Time." We've sat in the different rooms in a typical home and reflected on what it means to be a family. Today we're going out to the backyard and talking about siblings. My guess is you've never heard a sermon on siblings and yet, when you think about it, siblings play an important part in so many of our lives. Think of all the famous siblings we're familiar with: the Wright brothers, the Pointer sisters, the Kennedys, the Harbaugh brothers, and of course, the Kardashians. While **we** may not be famous, most of us here have at least one sibling.

I have one brother. He's two and a half years older than me and his name is Mike. He lives in Southern California and the past 35 years he's been in the athletic shoe business. When he was 18 he left home to attend college at USC where he had a football scholarship. That was 42 years ago and we've never lived under the same roof since the day he left. But as I think about my own life, that relationship may have shaped me more than any other I've had.

For a long time, researchers have tried to nail down what factors mold our personality. Some said it was our parents, particularly our mothers. Others have said it was our genes. Still others focus on our peers. But, increasingly, scientists say maybe the most powerful force is our siblings. A few years ago *Time* magazine ran an article called "The New Science of Siblings." Listen to what it said, "From the time they're born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and cautionary tales. They're our scolds, protectors, goads, tormentors, playmates, counselors, sources of envy, objects of pride. They teach us how to resolve conflicts and how not to; how to conduct friendships and when to walk away from them. Sisters teach brothers about the mysteries of girls; brothers teach sisters about the puzzle of boys. Our spouses arrive comparatively late in our lives; our parents eventually leave us. Our siblings may be the only people we'll ever know who truly qualify as partners for life. 'Siblings,' says family sociologist Katherine Conger of UC Davis, 'are with us for the whole journey.'"

You don't have to read far in the Bible to see the powerful influence siblings have on us. Right in the book of Genesis there's Cain and Abel; then you have Noah's sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Read a bit further and you have a sordid tale about Lot's daughters. Then there's Rachel and Leah. Read on in the book of Exodus and there's Moses, Aaron and their sister Miriam. Jump

into the New Testament and right away you see there are two sets of brothers among Jesus' disciples: James and John, better known as the Sons of Thunder, and Peter and Andrew. Some of Jesus' best friends who often opened their home to Jesus were a set of siblings: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Perhaps the best known story Jesus ever told, what we call the Prodigal Son, was about two brothers. And sometimes we forget Jesus himself had four brothers. Do you know their names? James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. He also had sisters, but we don't know their names (Mark 6:3). Think how hard it would have been to be Jesus' brother or sister. Talk about pressure! How many times did his younger brother, James, hear "How come you can't be more like your brother?"

What's so interesting is in almost every one of these sibling relationships there was some kind of rivalry expressed, and in more than a few there was also a life changing reconciliation.

Maybe the best example of this is two well known brothers whose story is told in the book of Genesis: Jacob and Esau. Their story begins in Genesis 25. Remember Abraham and his wife Sarah had just one son together very late in life and his name was Isaac. Isaac was married to Rebekah and for a long time Isaac and Rebekah were unable to have children.

You don't get to choose your siblings

Look what happens in verses 21–24.

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord.

The Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,

**and two peoples from within
you will be separated;**

one people will be stronger than the other,

and the older will serve the younger."

**When the time came for her to give birth, there
were twin boys in her womb.**

There are a lot of things we could say about this. I love how it says Isaac "prayed on behalf of his wife" and "the Lord answered his prayer." It sounds so simple, but I doubt it was. I'm sure there

were years and years of disappointment, discouragement and doubt. Many of you have dealt with the pain of infertility and you know how hard this can be. I'm sure Isaac and Rebekah agonized over this. It must have taken a toll on their relationship. But Isaac kept praying and finally God blessed them with twin boys. As her pregnancy progressed, it felt to her like there was a UFC match going on in her womb and when she asked the Lord about it he told her these twins would become the progenitors of two nations. Though the older would inherit the birthright, he'd end up serving the younger. Even though in Jewish culture the firstborn had certain privileges, birth order has little to do with our standing before God, and often in the Old Testament you see this kind of reversal.

The first thing we can learn from Jacob and Esau is God is absolutely sovereign over who our siblings are. We don't get to choose our siblings. Both Jacob and Esau were the answers to their parents' prayers, and in a very real sense they were what each of them needed. Jacob needed Esau to become the man God wanted him to be, and Esau needed Jacob. God would use this relationship, as tumultuous as it was from the start, to mold and shape these two men. It's the same with us. One of the things we need to do as a start is to say, "I accept you as my brother. I accept you as my sister. God knew what he was doing when he put us together in the same family."

Siblings are different

This leads to the second thing we can learn from them: siblings are often very different. This was apparent from the very start. Let's pick up the story in verse 25 .

The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents (verses 25–27).

Even though they came from the same womb they were polar opposites. Esau was hairy and buff and loved to hunt. He was the classic outdoorsman; a real man's man. Jacob, on the other hand, was a homebody who liked to watch the Food Channel.

In certain ways, this reminds me of my brother and me. My brother was one of those kids who shaved when he was six years old. When he graduated from the sixth grade he was six feet tall and grew four more inches before high school. Me, on the other hand, started high school weighing all of 95 pounds. I didn't discover a hair on my chest until I was 45 and it came out gray! So we were very different, not just physically but in other ways as well.

Sometimes the differences between siblings are learned behaviors. Psychologists talk about something called de-identification. That's when a younger sibling doesn't imitate or mirror an older sibling but instead tries to differentiate from them. So if a young girl has an older sister who gets pregnant out of wedlock, instead of imitating her behavior, she becomes a high achiever who never wants to mess up. It's like she's trying to stake out her own territory. If her sister's role is teen mom, hers is to be the good girl.

Whatever the reason for the differences that exist between us and our siblings, we need to learn to accept and value them. You look at Jacob and Esau and it's not like one was better than the other. They're just different. It's like in a marriage. Whenever I do a wedding I always tell the couple the person you're marrying is like the old record albums we called 45's. You buy the album because you love that song on one side, and you just have to accept what's on the other side. It's the same thing with our siblings. You may not like either side!

Rivalry is expected between siblings in a fallen world

The problem is often times these differences lead to jealousy, rivalry and competition. If you go back and think about all the examples from the Bible I mentioned, nearly all of them were conflicted relationships. Cain kills his brother, Abel, because God accepted Abel's offering rather than Cain's. Rachel and Leah compete over who can pop out the most babies. Moses' sister, Miriam, and his brother, Aaron are jealous of his leadership and criticize his choice of a spouse. Martha berates her sister, Mary, for not helping enough in the kitchen. The older son resents the younger in the Prodigal Son story. Even Jesus' own brothers took offense at him and thought he was off his rocker.

We see this with Jacob and Esau. Jacob came out of the womb grasping his brother's heel. His name actually means "grabber." Later, we see him scheming to grab his brother's birthright. Look at verses 29–34.

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

Back then, the birthright was reserved for the oldest son, and it meant extra property and privilege for Esau. But Esau was so famished he impulsively trades his birthright for a pot of stew,

and then he seals it with an oath, which back then couldn't be broken. As a result, he despised his birthright. It's like he couldn't care less about it, and you can imagine how he felt about his brother.

Sibling rivalry is to be expected in a fallen world. You're raising sinners. In his classic book, *The Strong-Willed Child*, James Dobson argues that the most irritating feature of child rearing is sibling rivalry: "Little children (and older ones too) are not content to just hate each other in private. They attack one another like miniature warriors, mobilizing their troops and probing for a weakness in the defensive line. They argue, hit, kick, scream, grab toys, taunt, tattle and sabotage the opposing force."

As I was growing up, people noticed I always had a bruise where my shoulder merges with my arm. Of course that's where my brother always chose to slug me when I did something he didn't like, which was often enough that the bruise just never went away. One recent study found that, on average, siblings between 3 and 7 years old engage in some kind of conflict 3.5 times an hour. Kids in the 2-to-4 age group top out at 6.3—or more than one clash every 10 minutes!

But as much as all the fighting can set parents' hair on end, there's a lot of learning going on too, specifically about how conflicts can be settled. Studies show the kids who practice the best conflict-resolution skills at home carry those abilities into relationships outside the home. What if one of the reasons God gives us siblings is to give us a safe place to learn to work out differences and take what we've learned into the adult world of work, marriage and friendship?

Parental favoritism often exacerbates sibling rivalry

For Jacob and Esau it didn't stop when they were kids. Years later this played out again when it came time for their father, Isaac, to pass on his blessing at the end of his life. The blessing was a bit different from the birthright. It had more to do with who would be considered the head of the extended family after Isaac's death. The whole story is told in chapter 27. Isaac is an old man who can hardly see and doesn't know how long he's going to last so he decides it's time to confer the blessing on his oldest son. He sends Esau out to hunt some wild game and cook him up some tasty food so he can give him his blessing. But Rebekah overhears all of this and she wants Jacob to have the blessing and not Esau. So she concocts a plan. She speaks to Jacob.

Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the Lord before I die.' Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so

that he may give you his blessing before he dies" (verses 6–10).

But Jacob's no dummy. So he says to his mother, "*But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing*" (verses 11–12). But Rebekah has it all figured out. She dressed Jacob up in Esau's clothes so he'd smell like his brother. She even covered his hands and neck with goatskins so he'd feel like his hairy brother. And it all worked perfectly.

But the result was a divided family. Verse 41 says, "*Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'*" When Rebekah heard about that, she arranged for Jacob to flee to her brother Laban miles away in Harran. She said, "*Stay with him for a while until your brother's fury subsides. When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I'll send word for you to come back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?*" (verses 44–45). Little did she know that her son would be gone for 20 years. As far as we know, she never saw him again.

There's something important to take away from this: Parental favoritism often exacerbates sibling rivalry. Isaac and Rebekah had clearly drifted apart as a married couple. Though they stayed married, in a sense they went their separate ways and they each took a boy with them. Way back in 25:28 it said, "*Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.*" What's interesting is Jacob went on to make the same mistake with his own sons. He had twelve sons, two of them were clearly his favorites: Joseph and Benjamin. And that would cause a tremendous rift in his own family.

Most parents want to be fair. We want to treat each of our kids as equals, and that's important. But it's also true that we might relate to one child more than another. If you value reading and quiet walks on the beach, a son who goes everywhere with a soccer ball bouncing off his feet and head may be hard for you to relate to. Or maybe one child is compliant and the other is rebellious. Maybe one child rejects your spiritual values while another clings to them. Maybe one child has earned more freedom than you can wisely give to another child. This can be the soil in which favoritism takes root. You have to work hard not to compare your children with each other. And you have to treat each one as unique. They **are** different and so you need to relate to them differently, but different doesn't mean unfair, and it certainly doesn't mean you love one more than the other. But, again, all of this teaches our kids to live in the real world, where things don't always seem fair.

Reconciliation is hard but possible

Jeffrey Kluger writes, "One of the greatest gifts of the sibling tie is that while warmth grows over time, the conflicts often fade.

After the shooting stops, even the fiercest sibling wars leave little lasting damage. Indeed, siblings who battled a lot as kids may become closer as adults—and more emotionally skilled too, often clearly recalling what their long-ago fights were about and the lessons they took from them."

This was true of Jacob and Esau. After 20 years and a few hard knocks Jacob decided to return home. With him were his two wives, Rachel and Leah, his twelve sons, lots of livestock and a few servants. But 20 years hadn't wiped away the memory of what happened and he's still deathly afraid of Esau. It's funny how time really doesn't heal all wounds. Time can help, but by itself it's not enough. So look what Jacob does in chapter 33:1–10.

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked.

Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant."

Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down.

Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?"

"To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said.

But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself."

"No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.

Isn't that a great story of reconciliation? What had Jacob learned? Well, he'd learned to take responsibility for his actions. He's now willing to go out in front of his men and his family to face Esau. He's also learned humility. He bows down seven times, admitting his wrong. He's also learned about God's grace. Notice how in verses 5 and 11 he speaks of how God has been gracious to him. Esau learned some things too. He learned to forgive. He learned not to let bitterness and resentment eat him up the rest of his

life. By receiving Jacob's gifts, he was saying yes to the relationship. He was opening himself up to his brother. I love the picture in verse 4 where Esau runs out to meet Jacob and embraces him.

You know, it strikes me that some of you are here this morning and you need to experience a moment like this with a brother or a sister. It may not even be a biological sibling, but a brother or sister in Christ. Maybe you're the one who has offended them, and you need to courageously face that person, humble yourself and say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" Or maybe you're on the other side of this and you need to allow a brother or a sister back into your life. It's hard to let go of your resentment, after all, you're right, she's wrong. But you need to extend forgiveness, not just for her sake but for your sake and for God's sake.

Remember the question Cain asked after God confronted him about killing his brother, Abel? God asked, "*Where is your brother Abel?*" And Cain replied, "*I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Genesis 4:9) That's the question. And the answer is, yes, you are.

One weekend I was speaking at a weekend camp and we brought our two daughters along. Some of the older kids at the camp started throwing rocks at Anne-Marie, who was about nine at the time. Kimberly, who was about four and built like a linebacker, saw what was happening. She ran out in front of Anne-Marie and shouted at the boys, who were about 25 yards away, "Stop throwing rocks! That's my sister!" Am I my sister's keeper? Kimberly knew how to answer that question.

So did Jesus. Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says, "*In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises' "*" (Hebrews 2:11-12).

Jesus is our big brother. He's the pioneer of our salvation. He suffered not just so we could be holy but so he could boldly declare us to be his brothers and sisters. He points the finger at us and says, "That's my brother! That's my sister!" Am I my brother's keeper? Jesus, said, "Yes, I am!"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2014 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1401-10

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, July 6, 2014 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.