

Title: The care of God in the face of indifference.

Genesis 25

Rev. Sharon Smith

I am struck when reading or listening to accounts of people who work the land – farmers, gardeners, landscapers, native ancestries – by actions of **care and attention**.

In her book braiding sweetgrass, Robin Wall Kimmerer of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, describes the care with which this plant, sweetgrass, is passed on.

She writes:

“Sweetgrass is best not planted by seed, but by putting roots directly in the ground. Thus the plant is passed from hand to heart to hand across years and generations. Its favoured habitat is sunny, well-watered meadow. It thrives along disturbed edges.”

Each time it is picked, each time it is used, each time it is re-planted – it is gift. It is tended. It requires great care.

Inspiring.

And then...

In this ancient Hebrew story of Genesis we read of the generations, the matriarchs and patriarchs – ancestors - of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths.

Stumbling along.

In these stories there are times of care for others and also of care-lessness or indifference.

And how the promise, the grace and care of God, the Creator, continues through and in spite of them.

And I kind of breathe a sigh of relief. For I all too well know humanities propensity for both caring and care-less apathy.

I am struck today by the contrasts of care and care-lessness or indifference in our readings.

Taking a narrative approach, lets walk through the story paying particular attention to this theme as it applies to each character.

Isaac: This account begins: These are the descendants of Isaac...

Some scholars (Waltke) show that Genesis is structured in a genealogical structure – naming the one out of whom the generations flow.

The account of the Heavens and the Earth...

(out of which humanity is birthed and the account of Adam (humankind) is told here)

The account of Adams descendents

(here Adam's sons and daughters are accounted for...)

The account of Noah and his family

The account of Shem...

The account of Terah's descendants – this was the father of Abraham and Abraham's story unfolds here...

But instead of moving to the account of Abraham's descendants (where we would read the story of Isaac)...

The narrative moves directly to the account of the descendants of Isaac...

Isaac is skipped. Or in narrative language he is gapped! A literary technique in Hebrew literature to get us to pay attention to something...

An overlooked, an charted life. A man possibly living the life of trauma, the promised one, who could not live up to all the expectations...

Isaac.

Bruce Waltke, Genesis Commentary

I am always amazed of the stories we choose to tell and those we don't.

The characters that we highlight, who gets the limelight... and who doesn't.

Those we gap...

"The things we focus on determine what we miss"

But those we miss, if we take care to look again, there is a whole other story. One that is indeed revealing.

This week, I listened to a podcast of the work of Howard Thurman – an African American mystic, a contemplative scholar, of the ilk of Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating...

And yet few contemplatives have heard of him. His books include:

Howard Thurman, Essential Writings, Jesus and the Disinherited, Meditations of the Heart, The Centering Moment, Disciplines of the Spirit, Footprints of a Dream, The Luminous Darkness, The Creative Encounter, Deep is the Hunger, The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman (Five volumes), The Inward Journey, A Strange Freedom, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman

And Howard Thurman quite aptly writes:

"Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers"

As we take care to consider, the gaps in our history, these are often where the treasures lie, the voices who often get silenced for speaking or acting against the status quo. And mainstream power has a way of censoring them.

And I am reminded of the name given to God by Hagar - the mother of Ishmael – the one excluded from the mainstream lineage almost completely – El Roi.

The God who sees.

And I am inspired to pause – to pay attention to what is before me, to look left and right, behind the curtains, under the carpets, who are the ones that I am not seeing.

To whom am I indifferent?

Rebekah: following the marriage to her traumatized partner Isaac (the one who survived the binding of his father Abraham and who is largely overlooked in the narrative).

We are told that Isaac prayed for her. And that Rebekah bore her sons some 20 years after her marriage began.

Yet Rebekah's pregnancy and birth is not narrated as some climactic answer to prayer – as it is for Sarah, Rachel, Hannah or Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist).

Rather Rebekah's experience of pregnancy produces for her inner conflict, questions, doubt.

Rebekah is an ancient woman who asks 'why?' "Why, I?"

The babies struggle within her and she asks, according to Midrash scholars a primal existential question: Why do I exist?

Rather than defining her, Rebekah gives voice to an existential crisis – what is this all for? What is my life about? And Rebekah seeks God.

With great care – she seeks out an answer to her question.

Somehow Rebekah takes the care (preserved even in the midst of this ancient narrative) to seek out her identity beyond her prescribed feminine role of this time - to birth children. She is a spiritual seeker – not satisfied with ordinary answers.

She seeks an answer from Godself, not unlike the character of Job who asks:

"Why did you bring me out of the womb? Better had I expired before any eye saw me, had I been as though I never was, had I been carried from the womb to the grave" (Job 10: 18-19).

But the narrative does not give her an answer.

And in the midst of the narrative, her and Isaac are divided on where they focus – each favoring, showing care for, one son to the demise of the other.

Jacob: The narrator instantly gives us reason to dislike this person – even before he was born – he was grabbing at what he couldn't be/couldn't have, and he is named after his deceptive quality... what a way to be identified!

And Jacob's journey in the Genesis narrative is a movement.
From not caring for his brother, using his skill to take away, to benefit himself.
To a realization that he is cared for, he is seen and doesn't need to grab.

Jacob's struggle is against the culture and particularly against primogeniture rights (the rights given to the first born in this culture).

"A practice which protects the order of society is always a way of destining some to advantage and others to disadvantage – it defines privilege." Brueggemann.

To be in a cultural system that overlooks a person...
This struggle tears at the soul.
How do I trust I am cared for? How do I care for my needs?
How do I speak up against the injustice?
The wrestle of Jacob is sociopolitical and spiritual. Our wrestling is always in context.
this story...

Caring for what is important, when a person is oppressed, is often judged.
It looks like anger, named as deceit, uncomfortable to be around.
It feels like survival.

This is a position that gets the attention of God. The Hebrew scriptures pay particular attention to the how God sojourns with the low/despised ones. (Walter Brueggemann).

Esau: The final character in our story. The hairy one, impulsive, given privilege, status and yet is indifferent to it. Showing a lack of interest or concern to those close to him. Not knowing what he was given until it has been taken from him.

In her book, *Acedia and me*, spirituality author - Kathleen Norris describes a condition that can easily grip a person, one of tedium, boredom, indifference, care-lessness.
The fourth century monks called it Acedia. It later became known as sloth.

And Kathleen notes how easily it creeps in and takes over. Her thought life, her actions, her vocation, her relationships – until nothing seems to have purpose.
She differentiates it from clinical depression.
As the antidote seems to be a daily rhythm of work, prayer, rest and play.
To not overthink, and simply to do the thing that is before us to do.
For her it is an early morning walk, and the habit of praying a daily psalm.

Continue to scatter seed – to leave the growth to Creator.

To know my place, to know my need, to break the cycle of my self-defeating thoughts, to find my rhythm of rest, of prayer, of work, of play.

I end with a prayer by Howard Thurman:

The concern which I lay bare before You today is:

Whatever disaffection there is between me and those who are or have been very close to me—I would seek the root or cause of such disaffection, and with the illumination of Your mind, O God, to understand it.

I give myself to Your scrutiny that, whatever there may be in me that is responsible for what has happened, I will acknowledge.

Where I have wronged or given offense deliberately or without intention, I seek a face-to-face forgiveness.

What I can undo I am willing to try; what I cannot undo, with that I seek to make my peace.

How to do these things, what techniques to use, with what spirit—for these I need and seek Your wisdom and strength, O God.

Whatever disaffection there is between me and those who are or have been very close to me, I lay bare before You.
