

A Different Set of Rules
A Sermon on Genesis 25:19-34 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ July 12, 2026

Let's start with a good news story. Three months ago St. Paul's hired Nicole Steele as our part-time custodian. The personnel committee was concerned that keeping St. Paul's clean would be a big job for a part-time employee, but Nicole was completely undaunted by the task. For most of her adult life, Nicole worked on ranches in the Mountain West states. For Nicole, cleaning St. Paul's is not difficult, especially compared with the task of keeping a horse barn clean and in order. So we have a very clean building, and a new, happy member of our church staff.

One of the things you and I can be confident about is that all the members of our staff, new and experienced, do not have significant histories of criminal activity. That's because one of the rules of the Episcopal Church in 2026 is that we pay for professional background checks for all of our church employees. Running a professional background check on employees is something that used to be a norm in many churches and diocese, but in recent years it has been turned into a rule. We are required to run a professional background check for all church employees. This is a rule that has been put in place to protect those who are most vulnerable in our communities.

It would be a really good idea for our political parties to make some rules requiring serious investigations of candidates for Federal, State, and even local elections. For the Democratic and Republican parties, doing serious investigations of candidates for Congress has sometimes been an expectation, but it seems like it's not a formal requirement. This week we learned the disadvantages of that approach.

It would have been helpful if the Democratic Party had launched a serious investigation of Graham Platner last August when he announced he would be a candidate for the United States Senate in Maine. The things that we learned about Mr. Platner in the past eleven months would disqualify him from serving as custodian of St. Paul's Church, let alone from serving as a United States Senator.

For all organizations, it's helpful to have formal, written rules instead of assuming that everyone will follow unspoken expectations and norms. Having written rules requires our organizations to have discussions and make decisions in ways that are often more thoughtful, inclusive and intentional.

That doesn't mean that all formal rules are good and helpful. This year at their annual meeting, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to exclude churches that allow women to preach or serve as pastors. This rule was discussed in an open meeting, and the delegates to the Annual Meeting were very intentional, and it's still a terrible rule.

As Christians we have an extra question to consider as we make our rules. What are the rules that will move us closer to God's vision for us? It's not always easy to answer this question. As seen with the Southern Baptist Convention this year, there are times when people they think they are pursuing God's vision, but their rules end up hurting people and working against the main ideas of Holy Scripture.

What are the rules that move us closer to God's vision for us? What are the rules that are coming from our blindness, from our fears, from our bitterness? What are the rules that are helping us do what God intends for us?

Much of the Bible can be read as a contest to determine the right set of rules, as an argument over which set of rules is what God intends for us. Several of these stories have to do with the special rights, powers, and privileges of the first born children. The Hebrew Scriptures include many passages where the first born son, or the first born daughter, or the first lamb of the flock, or the first fruits gathered in the harvest were to be dedicated for a special purpose, or were empowered for some special task. In Exodus 13 the people are given a rule that firstborn children and even firstborn animals be brought to religious services to be sanctified for a special purpose. When I read the book of Genesis,

one of the themes I notice is that, in one chapter after another, God's people are extremely resistant to rules that favored the first born child.

In today's story from Genesis, Rebekah became pregnant with twins. *The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So Rebekah went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."*

God has given an unexpected message to Rebekah. Her first-born son will not be favored by God over the second child. And this is what happens in the verses that follow. Esau is born first, and is favored by his father. Jacob is born second. Rebekah loves the Jacob. Later in the story, Rebekah, the mother, will team up with Jacob, the second son, to trick the father into giving Jacob the privileges and powers normally reserved for the first born son.

The father and the first son and the set of rules about the special privileges of the first born were the losers in this contest. The mother and the second son were the winners. The entire second half of the book of Genesis, 26 chapters, are about Jacob, the second son, and about his family. Jacob's name will eventually be changed to Israel, and the entire nation of Israel will trace their heritage to him, not to his older brother. In the story of God's people, the first born son does not receive special powers and privileges.

The argument applies to the women as well. When Jacob is a young man his older brother wants to kill him, so he leaves Canaan and works for his uncle Laban. We'll read this chapter of Genesis in a few weeks. Jacob falls in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel and asks to marry her. At the wedding, Laban tricks Jacob and says, "This does not follow the rules of our people. The older daughter has the privilege of being married first." Nevertheless, Jacob is resistant, and ends up marrying both the older and the younger daughter.

As Genesis continues we come across many variations on this theme. God, and God's people, and God's story are extremely resistant to rules about the privileges and powers being given to the first born son or to the first born daughter.

The theme of resistance to the privileges of the first born runs strong through the book of Genesis, but it continues through the Hebrew Scriptures. My guess is that the children of Israel were living in a region where most of the surrounding tribes and nations had similar rules about the privileges and powers being given to the first born child. But in God's story, the people and the God who leads them are resistant to the rules that favored the first born child over the younger children.

In chapter sixteen of the book of Samuel, the prophet Samuel travels to the house of Jesse, to anoint a new king for Israel. Jesse gathers his older sons together for the visit. Samuel examines Jesse's oldest son, who was tall and strong and handsome. *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."* At the end of the passage we find out that God had chosen, not the first son or the second son or the third son, but the youngest of Jesse's sons to be the new king over Israel.

Many of the rules that people make end up preserving the special powers of those who are most powerful. In most cases the chief executive, and the members of the board of directors, and the rich people, and the president will never face accountability for the bad things they have done.

We cannot know everything in the mind of God, but anyone who has learned much about the Bible knows that God doesn't favor rules that give special protections for the rich and powerful. God doesn't favor rules that hurt those who are least able to help themselves. In God's story, the first rule is love. In God's story, privileges and power and full participation in the community are for everyone, not just for a few people.

This is one of the main ideas of Jesus' life and ministry. In the Gospels Jesus followed God's rules about loving our neighbors. Jesus broke the rules that took power away from those who were

powerless. Jesus broke the rules that kept people separated from each other. You and I might not notice it, but Jesus was breaking the rules when he had that long conversation with the Samaritan woman. Jesus was following God's rules about love when he went to the house of the tax collector, Zacchaeus, and ate dinner with him. Jesus was following God's rules about love when he touched the man with leprosy and healed him. Jesus was following God's rules about love when he gave up his power and let himself be arrested, put on trial and crucified.

The message of Jesus is that God has a different set of rules for us to follow. God's rules are not complicated. God's rules are not a heavy burden for us. God's rules are rules of compassion, empowerment and loving our neighbors.

Put the people first. Feed the hungry. Don't presume that you have the power to judge others. Care for the sick and the disabled. Pay attention to the widows. Listen to the people who have been excluded. Take care of the little children. If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have a coat. Love your neighbor as yourself, including your neighbor who speaks a different language or who has a different religion.

God's rule is life-giving and empowering. God's rule brings people together. God's rule brings joy and hope to the people. God's rule is love.