

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
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Genesis 25: 19-34

In our age of memes, occasionally there is a good one. Such as this one that says, “Courage is knowing it might hurt, and doing it anyway. Stupidity is the same. And that is why life is hard.” What is the fine line between courage and stupidity, between commitment and obsession, between faith and delusion, between conviction and stubbornness?

In our Genesis story about Jacob and Esau, we might wonder what the fine line is between being guided by prophecy and calling and being guided by one’s own ambitions and proclivities. Is Jacob’s grasping at Esau’s ankle a trait to be lifted up, or a personality flaw? You see, part of the messiness of Hebrew narrative is that often the answer is both, or that these two aspects can’t be cleanly separated. It is not always easy to parse apart the way God is at work through these characters and their sinful patterns and human conniving? It’s all intertwined like a dense thicket.

As my professor would always say, in Hebrew narrative there are no perfect protagonists. They are always mixed characters, and the biblical writers do not shield us from this, they do not hide their flaws or the questions around their actions and motives. So, as we hear about God’s plans through these early patriarchs and their families, through these early generations, we get both traces of how God is using and working through these flawed characters, and of how patterns of sin and brokenness continue to manifest from generation to generation. This is why I chose our poem today, that sense of multiple intertwined realities and emotions at play. More than just one simple thing.

Jacob’s conniving, for example, will both get him the birthright, as God tells Rebekah, but it will also cause conflict and troubles in his relationship with Esau. Later on, he will hear that Esau’s entourage is pursuing him, and Jacob assumes for revenge and violence. Esau seems to forgive, but that live possibility is there because of the way Jacob went about things. And these trouble-making trends will manifest in his children, who connive and slaughter the shechemites, and who sell off their own brother Joseph, the favored younger one, thus breaking Jacob’s heart.

With Jacob and Esau we hear a theme of sibling rivalry that echoes that of Cain and Abel. In that earlier story, it is Cain, the older, who is the farmer, the vegetarian, and Abel the herder whose meat offering is deemed by God, for some unclear reason, as more favorable than Cain’s offering of fruits. Perhaps it is just

God's privileging of the younger. Nonetheless, it leads to jealousy and anger and Cain killing his brother Abel.

Here, Esau is the man of the field, the hunter, the first born, the one spending more time and having more connection with his father. And Jacob is the younger, whose connections are closer to camp, his mother's favorite, the one more familiar with farming. But again, the younger is chosen to play the prime role in God's plans. The intertwined prophecy says that the older will serve the younger. But this does not happen on its own. As they become men, Esau is still the one with status and birthright. Isaac, when on his deathbed, will still attempt to give his blessing to Esau. Therefore, part of how this paradigm changes is through the conniving of Jacob and his mother Rebekah, working slyly to upend the prevailing patterns. It wasn't going to happen on its own. Hierarchies and patterns of power-brokering do not usually surrender their cultural power willingly.

Esau plays a type of foil. He comes off as an Oaf, the meat-eating man trading away his place in the family, his status as first-born, all for a vegetarian stew. Bread and Lentils. Cringe-worthy.

There are a couple intertwined motifs in this story that carry through much of scripture. One is God's tendency to go against cultural norms, to choose the lesser rather than the greater, to choose the younger rather than the older, like choosing the small and scrawny David over his older and physically stronger and more imposing brothers. We hear this motif continue to develop in the gospels where Jesus chooses unlikely followers, chooses the questionable and unqualified, where the least will be the greatest, where the one who seeks to be great must become the least of all, where caring for the least is likened to caring for Christ himself.

But upending cultural patterns does not happen all that naturally. There is some grasping, some strategizing, some confronting or conniving that goes into it. And so, there is some level of trying to assert oneself that will always look like grasping, always look like taking something that belongs to another. Justice, as the bible conceives of justice, that is everyone cared for and connected and having what they need, does not usually happen on its own. To advocate and work for justice is fight against prevailing systems and patterns. It takes a bit of Jacob's persistence. God's purposes advanced through human action.

There is another motif intertwined here. It is that of the trickster. Now the category of trickster has been identified in literature more broadly, across time and cultures. But it seems to have application to scripture where a character advances God's purposes and plans through sly choices, through trickery and deception. We see it

all through the Jacob cycle. Rebekah will play the part along with Jacob when she has Jacob put fur on his arm to steal Isaac's blessing as Isaac is failing, stealing the blessing that would otherwise go to Esau. Abigail plays the role to avert disaster when David acts like a rageful knucklehead. There are plentiful examples, even Ruth with Boaz, acting in ways to force the hands of the ones who should have acted on their own.

But the thing with the trickster is that their actions are not clearly good or evil, they live in this gray area, and along with advancing good, they often create chaos and dilemmas along the way. Their character is often nebulous or questionable, like Rebekah deceiving her own husband. The trickster is hard to get fully behind, because they often act in ways that should not be emulated.

The motif serves to emphasize human involvement in God's purposes, that God works in ways that invite and incorporate human actions, human personalities, human participation. That together God and these human characters are working against prevailing forces to bring about something new and good. And yet at the same time, it serves to emphasize human sinfulness, brokenness, and frailty. That often, at each step, those human proclivities also perpetuate patterns of brokenness, complicating and creating new problems along the way. These human proclivities also bring God's plans to breaking points, when it seems unredeemable. And God must do something new.

It is that newness that we hear in our reading from Romans. That eventually God would take on the human problem differently, sending Christ in human flesh and likeness, putting to death our sinful nature, and offering forgiveness and the indwelling spirit to enliven and to guide our humanity, to guide our choices and our attempts to participate in God's purposes and plans.

We hear the good news that for humans who tend towards brokenness and enmity, towards sinful patterns and fragmented relationships, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." There is hope for our humanity, not so prone to the same sinful patterns and its resulting condemnation.

God still calls and invites us to be a part of God's plans, to work together with God. God still calls us to seek justice, and to care for the poor, to make space for

those that have been excluded, and to take the good news to the ends of the earth. But how do we engage in our part, God working through human action, without merely perpetuating the sinful patterns of the past?

Well, the second part of that good news in Romans 8 is that not only are we released from condemnation, but we are given God's Spirit to indwell us. Verse nine says, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." The Spirit of God in us, like an animating force, if we let it. The Spirit of God within us, to guide our choices and actions and responses, if we can learn to listen and move in concert with that Spirit. The Spirit of God so close to us, as close to as our breath and our heartbeat, if can learn to feel and discern it.

We are still called to be God's actors in the world. We are still mixed characters capable of both good and harm, compassion and cold-heartedness. We are still wise to be humble and to recognize our sinful tendencies. But there is hope, that in Christ there is no longer condemnation. And through the Spirit, we might learn to walk with wisdom and grace, with poise and calm, with boldness and courage. Through the Spirit indwelling us, we might learn to walk with God anew, to be in step with God, to be in relationship and connection, to learn to listen and to be chastened, to learn to advocate and act as God's emissaries.

That is our work, our discipline. That by learning to walk with and be in step with the Spirit that indwells us, we might learn to walk those lines between courage and stupidity, through faith and delusion, the lines between conviction and stubbornness. Our work is to learn how to walk in step with God, to not fight against the Spirit, but to be directed by God's Spirit, seeking to perpetuate God's plans without perpetuating our sinful proclivities.

And all God's people said... Amen.

*The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob*

*(Rom 9:10–12)*

<sup>19</sup> These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,<sup>20</sup> and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.<sup>21</sup> Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.<sup>22</sup> The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.<sup>23</sup> 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."

<sup>24</sup> When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.<sup>25</sup> The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.<sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

<sup>27</sup> When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.<sup>28</sup> Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

*Esau Sells His Birthright*

*(Heb 12:16)*

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished.<sup>30</sup> Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.)<sup>31</sup> Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."<sup>32</sup> Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"<sup>33</sup> Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.<sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

**Romans 8** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

<sup>9</sup> But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.