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15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL
13 July 2008

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

ESAU'S BIRTHRIGHT DESPISED

GENESIS 25:19-34

Something is amiss in Genesis: a birthright despised, given away, accepted? Abraham's descendants seem to be out to lunch, out of order. Esau, being the hairy muscular one, lets down firstborn sons and daughters everywhere by letting his feet be taken out from under him by Jacob, a heel-grabbing soup-chef with impeccable timing. Hungry, he gives away his birthright for a slice of bread and a cup of lentil stew. He eats and drinks, rises and goes. Then the Scriptures declare, "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

What? Why the "thus"? How does eating and drinking and rising and going away translate into despising one's birthright? Does Esau despise his birthright because of all the pressures that come with it? Does he despise it only after he has given it away? Or does he despise it, because it comes between his brother and him? Being human, Esau probably despises his birthright, because of some combination thereof.

Of course, the Scriptures prepare us for this story's dramatic conclusion from the beginning. Jacob and Esau wrestle inside of the womb and are still at it when they are born. Rebekah is on edge during the pregnancy. Mother's intuition suggests that there are problems---not with the pregnancy---but with the children that the pregnancy will produce. First she grumbles: "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" Then, in delightfully biblical terms, she "inquires" of the Lord (Oh, Lord?), who diagnoses the

problem: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” Two nations, two peoples: the possibility of twins was probably intimidating enough without conjuring up images of war and Olympics.

So this is the prophecy: Jacob and Esau will disrupt the balance of human relations among God’s covenant people. Thus it is for Abraham’s descendants; thus it was for Abraham himself. Remember Abraham earns his reputation as “Father Abraham” with both Sarah and Hagar. Remember Hagar: Ishmael’s mom? Remember Ishmael: Abraham’s son, Abraham’s first, even though Isaac is the one through whom God’s covenant with Israel passes, because Sarah sends Hagar and Ishmael on their way? Apparently, they are sent to Mecca, because Ishmael functions as Islam’s Isaac, Abraham’s chosen one, the one with whom Abraham rebuilds the Ka’ba, the box-like structure toward which Muslims pray five times daily and journey toward when on pilgrimage. Blessings in Hebrew Scriptures are increasingly bestowed on second sons (and ultimately babies) from Isaac to Jacob to David (and this is often because of their moms) suggesting that our ancestors in the faith have ignored, challenged and/or defied conventional wisdom since God established covenant with Abraham.

Every generation struggles with God’s promise to Abraham, and Isaac is no different. Struggle, doubt and blessing go hand-in-hand in the Abrahamic tradition, though, unfortunately, the struggle too often is framed in terms of who is pregnant and who is not. Meaning: Abraham and Sarah, then Isaac and Rebekah, pray to God not as the God of Israel, who is blessing them and calling them to action, but as God, MD, fertility specialist. Of course, without children, it is difficult to imagine how the faith survives, much less thrives, in an ethnically-based, nomadic tradition. Thus Abraham doubts because of his age. Sarah doubts after Abraham impregnates Hagar. Isaac doubts, because he feels the pressure of being the “chosen one” and is childless at age 60. Rebekah doubts, because she is 40 years old and yet to have a son (or daughter); and even though Isaac is in a position to console her by saying, “You know Mom was almost twice your age when she had me,” that may not feel like consolation. At last she

conceives and bears Esau and Jacob: “The first comes out red, all is body like a hairy” (conjuring up images of Elmo from Sesame Street). Scripture then reports, “Afterward Esau’s brother Jacob comes out, with his hand gripping his brother’s heel.” God takes struggle and doubt and transforms them into blessing. God’s promises to covenant people are fulfilled in God’s way and in God’s time. Impatience does not help, and expectations that are too clear or rigid cause us to bump up against human limitations, limitations that God exceeds naturally.

Now a series of disclaimers: Please do not confuse being blessed with always being happy or being cursed with always feeling blue. Is Esau blessed or cursed? If he journeys through life despising his birthright, he probably feels cursed, but you know, as difficult as it is for me to say this (because I am the first of my parents’ litter), the whole notion of a birthright is arbitrary; it is absurd. Who says all one’s parents stuff (including their power) should go to the first son or daughter? It, like other forms of discrimination, is something that human beings---something that we---came up with on our own.

God’s promise to Rebekah is unsettling from the beginning: “The one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger.” Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait: The stronger shall serve the younger? Says who? This is offensive to those who define strength in terms of physical power. Being strong---being rich, powerful and/or persistent---means never having to apologize or ask forgiveness. It is the Nike ethic at its worst: Do not think about it. Act selfishly and impulsively. Do not worry about who will suffer or the long term consequences of a decision. Just do it! Follow New York Yankee icon Yogi Berra’s advice: When you come to a fork in the road, take it!

But wait, God is saying that the strong will serve rather than be served. So the Scriptures define strength in terms of thoughtfulness and humility, in terms of service and self-awareness. Look before you leap. Somebody may be grabbing your heel. Listen before you speak. Does Esau even hear Jacob when he says, “First sell me your birthright?” Or is he so caught up in the trappings of his appetites that he is incapable of taking care of himself, of exercising self-discipline? And here is another question (one

of those unanswerable ones I gravitate toward): How hungry is Esau? The Scriptures say that he is famished, but famished by whose standards? However hungry he is, I am sure that he becomes even hungrier when he smells that lentil soup brewing (talking about it, in fact, is making me hungry; Holligan's serves lentil soup, I think; it is the only restaurant I am aware of that serves lentil soup and fried okra).

However hungry Esau is, Jacob is poised to take advantage of the situation. Did you catch the irony in Esau's statement when he bursts into the kitchen and begs, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished?" Famished, huh? Jacob is the one who is famished. He is the one who is about to feast on the red stuff: on the soup and on Esau, his Elmo-looking brother. Esau, convinced that he is dying, surrenders to Jacob, the trickster, who later will be called Israel. Maybe he is starving to death, but if he is big, strong, skilled hunter that the Scriptures make him out to be, this is difficult to imagine; and given the family business, it is even more difficult imagine that God would let Abraham's grandson starve to death.

Perhaps the saddest sentence in this story is: "Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob (who, as it turns out, was not only fond of, but adept, at games)." In psychology, this is called triangulation. In politics, this is called an election. One person steps outside of the covenant or social order in an effort to rearrange it hierarchically. The covenant or social order becomes fragmented. A once, or at least ideally, harmonious competes from within. New social orders emerge, and then each person within the new social order has to adjust to his or her new place within it. If this cycle seems particularly vicious and/or familiar, it is because it is. The church is divided. Families are divided, and so is the world.

At the center of this destructive pattern is the practice of valuing one person's life over the life of another human being. Isaac loves Esau. Rebekah loves Jacob, and you know what? Love is not mutually exclusive. The problem with a birthright is that it suggests that one person is more valuable

than another. It invites judgment and competition. Thus Esau judges himself by the bushiness of one's hair and by a person's hunting ability. Jacob puts less emphasis on brute strength and appearance and more on plotting and stewing. His son Joseph, Jacob's eleventh son and Rachel's first, complicates the formula even further. Then there is Jesus Christ, first born of Mary, who is triangulated, politicized and crucified for preaching release to the captives and good news to the poor. He probably despised his birthright at times, and yet he gave it willingly, not because he was tricked, but because he was faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the God of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, to the God of Esau (with whom I am sure that he identified), to the God of you and to the God of me. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church in the Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.