

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year C

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June 19, 2016

Text: Genesis 25:21-34

Title: “We Live. We Love: Birth Order”

One of the richest experiences of annual conference is the worship. I mean they are experiences of joy and laughter and heart-strangely-warmed-tears-welling-up-in-the-eyes-spiritual revival. Throughout the experience, preachers and speakers share honest accounts of their pain, disappointments and profound confidence in the grace of God.

I won't speak for Susie or Sam—Sue will be sharing with you next week about her observations. One of the things that struck me this last week as I sat listening to inspiring people who are in the trenches on the street, caring for the vulnerable who are stretching to be free of addiction or homelessness or unemployment due to a prison record or injustice due to racism in one form or another or any number of human conditions that result in living lives in ways that are less than God intends; I found myself thinking: sometimes I get tired of “doing church”. Sometimes I get tired of meetings—oh so many meetings--and dealing with disagreements over buildings or carpet or kitchens or parsonages or whatever the matter may be. I get tired of such things because ultimately I wonder if they really matter when we live in a society where one crazed individual can take a gun and kill 50 people and injure over 50 more. Suddenly I don't really care if we do the kitchen first or the sanctuary carpeting first. When hearts, minds and souls are at stake do those things really matter? Sometimes I get tired of “doing church” when I think about all the pain out there and I feel the pain in here (pointing to my heart).

We live in this tension **AS** the church of **DOING** church so that we can **BE** the church. We get involved—many of us--in projects and committees and teams and boards to make things work and function but what if all the busyness is just that: busyness? What if we are so inward focused, so caught up in doing church and taking care of our own needs and preferences, that we lose track of what it means to be the church, witnesses for the mercy, grace and justice seeking God we worship in Jesus the Christ? We want for all of this to mean something beyond just doing our duty to come and sing and pray and stay awake during the sermon don't we? We want this to be more about just us and our preferences don't we?

Jacob and Esau have something to teach us about preoccupation with our own needs and preferences. It's an old story, an oft told story of brothers. Rebecca, their mother, knew they would be trouble before they were even born.

When Lynn was pregnant with our son, Josh, she would tell me she could feel him moving. I'll never forget the first time I felt him move. We were sitting in a movie theatre in

Kenton, Ohio watching the new release, “Back to the Future.” In the middle of the movie, she took my left hand and placed it on her swelling stomach as the professor said something about “gigawatts”. Suddenly I felt a moving bulge. It was either an elbow or a heel. Whatever it was, I felt it and it was one of the most thrilling moments of my life. There’s something special about a father experiencing that first movement of a child’s life. Mothers have that privilege from the start but fathers not so much.

There’s nothing in this story of Isaac’s and Rebecca’s boys being known in this way by their father, but I expect Rebecca knew they would be trouble. Already they were so active in her womb that she was beside herself, so much so that she wondered if she could handle it, wondered if it was to be this painful to carry these two boys could she do it: “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” she cried. Even before he was born Jacob was honing the wrestling skills he would need when as a man he would wrestle with God. So turbulent were these days of pregnancy that Rebecca came to a point at which she had enough. So she did what many of us often do when we are at our wits end and don’t know where to turn, what else to do. She prayed, asking God what this was all about, asking God, I expect, “Why?”

So often there are no answers to the “why” questions. Why do we have in this country such a proliferation of people who for one reason or another feel compelled to randomly kill innocent people? Why in this country—the richest country in the history of the world—do we still have people impoverished? Why did my cousin’s 23 year old son-- who had just completed training as an RN--die as he slept, the victim—apparently—of a brain aneurysm? Why do good people suffer for no apparent reason? So often there are no easy or clear answers to the “why” questions.

But when Rebecca asks the “why” question regarding her in utero boys inflicting such pain, God gives her an answer. Nothing about this being normal morning sickness. No explanation that her body is undergoing dramatic changes in pregnancy and this is to be expected. It’s something loftier, God tells her. Something more far reaching. Two personalities are vying for power even before they are born. One is stronger than the other but the weaker one will turn out to be the leader of the two. Different as they are, two nations will come from them and their families.

Rebecca has her answer. And when the twin boys are born, Esau comes first which is important because the first born of the mother has special privileges that the younger siblings do not. To the end, though, these two boys are wrestling as Jacob next is born holding on to Esau’s heel.

Now you might think that Jacob is the tougher kid. He is the one who hangs on to the bitter end. He is the one who later wrestles all night with God. Until that messenger will bless him he will not let him go much like he does with his brother as he is born. But it’s the opposite. Esau is the manly one. Apparently having lots of hair was a sign of manliness because the story is clear that Esau is a hairy guy, sounds like a “Chewbacca” mini-me. As it turns out, Esau grows to become a real man’s man. He’s an outdoors guy. Hunting was his thing. If there had been a show about surviving in the wilderness in those days, Esau would have been a star. Outdoor living was his preference and because he could cook a mean venison steak he had just harvested, his father Isaac favored him. Isaac was a sucker for a fresh, well-seasoned wild game dinner.

Jacob on the other hand was a real momma’s boy. He’d rather hang out in the tents and read than pick up a bow and go hunting. Because he wasn’t a hunter I imagine him preferring

vegetarian fare. Though he wasn't an outdoors guy he still knew his way around the kitchen. As he hung out with his mother and the other women, he learned how to cook—just differently than his brother, the hunter.

And one day Jacob is cooking up some tomato based lentil stew. Esau comes in from a day in the fields without any luck. He's been out there all day with nothing to show for it. He's hungry, actually beyond hungry. He's at that point where his stomach is growling and his temples are feeling strained with the feeling of hunger. We call them "temple squeezes" in our home. Jacob's stew is filling the tent with delicious aroma. Like Thanksgiving day when you've been eating little all day in order to make room for that great turkey dinner, like waking up on a lazy Saturday to the sound and smell of bacon cooking in the kitchen and fresh made coffee in the pot, Esau can't hardly control himself as he grabs a spoon and tries to dip it in the pot. But Jacob slaps his hand because he has a plan. He has designs on Esau's birthright.

In the ancient world the birthright not only had to do with a person's identity—it was the one thing that marked a person as the head of the family, it also had to do with economics. It was given to the first born son, and if the father was prosperous, that son could be set for life because when the father died, the firstborn son received a "double portion" of the inheritance. He received twice what any of his other brothers would get. Yet, it wasn't just about money. As I said, it meant that the son who received the birthright was considered the head of the family. He would take his father's place as the patriarch of the family. He was the leader and made decisions and basically ruled over the family. It was through the eldest son that the family line was primarily continued. All of this was put in place to ensure the future of the family.

So this was a big deal, this birthright. Jacob understood this, and he knows his brother. He knows that Esau was the kind of guy that doesn't save for the future. IRA's and 401 K's would bore him to death. Whenever he received an allowance, Esau was the kind of kid who couldn't keep it in his pocket. Off he'd go to buy a cheap toy that might last a day or off to the ice cream store to buy a cone that would last much less. He might have been physically stronger, but Esau was a bit dull when it came to delayed gratification. He didn't get it. If he had a need, he wanted to take care of it immediately even if the consequences stretched into the future. Jacob knew his brother.

As Esau stands there with his spoon in his hand, looking desperate, Jacob seizes the opportunity: "Sell me your birthright!" And Esau falls for it hook, line and sinker: "Why do I care about that when I am so hungry my head hurts?" Jacob I imagine fanning the steam of the stew with his hand toward his brother: "First, swear to me!" And he did. With that, Jacob becomes head of the family and a double portion inheritor. And Esau dull as he is does not realize what he has just done for the price of a bowl of soup.

As I sat at annual conference last week and listened to the incredible ministry we are all involved in as United Methodists, as I heard Faith Fowler describe the vision they have at Cass Avenue to build tiny homes on 25 lots on city blocks they purchased from the city in order to create a community of people who were formerly homeless who will be able to own their own homes; as I heard about the people in Flint caring for the residents by handing out bottled water and filters and how they are still doing so even after others have stopped; I was inspired. But I also wondered if sometimes I am so busy doing church that I forget that we are called to be the church, to be the presence of the love, mercy, grace and justice of Jesus in the world, and I wonder how many times have I sold the birthright of being the church for the bowl of busyness.

I wonder if sometimes we are so concerned about having our needs met that we sell our birthright of being witnesses ourselves to God's loving, caring, justice-seeking presence in the world to make a difference in the lives of other human beings. I wonder if we are sometimes so concerned about taking care of our own hungers that we sell ourselves short. What are we willing to sell far too cheaply in order to meet our immediate needs?

This isn't something that happens just with the church, of course. Some sell their integrity. There are business people who do so in order to increase personal profits at the expense of fair wages and treatment of company employees. We have all heard of respected leaders who sell off careers and family for the momentary pleasure of an illicit affair. Teenagers—and not just teenagers—wreck futures by getting involved with drugs just because “everyone else is doing it.” Or what about the driver who gets behind the wheel after a long night of drinking and takes someone else's life in a crash?

There are some things that should never be for sale. But when we feel highly anxious, in desperate need, we are vulnerable to impulsive decisions that can have a devastating affect for the future.

Have you bought any expensive soup lately? If so, what might you do differently? How might you guard against giving away something so valuable it should never be sold?

The gift in this story is that in spite of Jacob's abuse of his brother and in spite of Esau's dimwitted sale of something so precious, God manages to use both of them. God still holds them both as God's children. God stays involved with both, loves them both, uses them both for good.

When we see ourselves as being valued by God and blessed by God—in spite of the mistakes we might make—then we have inherited value regardless of what we own or what our circumstances might be. As one commentator put it:

*Do we allow God to determine our value, or do we let anxiety drive what we feel that we need? Have we sold ourselves to the God who created us and cares for us, giving us what we need, or are we still willing to sell ourselves so cheaply to things that don't matter and things that may ultimately harm us?*

*... despite the deception and stupidity in this story, somehow God is able to work it out. God doesn't abandon Jacob or Esau, and they will eventually reconcile. Jacob becomes Israel, and a new nation is launched out from his family. Esau will be the father of another nation, Edom, which, despite the brothers' reconciliation, will always be at odds with Israel. Even when we have sold out to the world, God still values us as his children.*

*We were "bought with a price," says Paul (1 Corinthians 6:20). May we recognize our value [...no matter our birth order]!*