

<b>THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT</b>
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FAITH FOR AN UNTIDY WORLD

*A sermon preached July 13, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill*

**Genesis 25:19-34** <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. <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.

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There is an old saying that applies to the stories about Jacob: God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. Those who think religion is mostly about being well-behaved and God's role mostly that of a hall monitor in a prissy boarding school tend to skip over Jacob's life.

There is more ink devoted to the stories of Jacob than any other Old Testament character, which is strange if the point of scripture is simply to present us with moral lessons, because Jacob is

no paragon of rectitude. In fact, he was something of a rogue, a roué, a picaresque character who moved forward by outwitting any human obstacle in his way.

Esau was Jacob's twin brother – first in birth order and therefore, according to the law of primogeniture, due to inherit the larger share of the inheritance from Issac. Jacob wrangles this birthright from him. Had Esau been less a man of action and more of a reflective turn of mind he could have noticed a certain sign of things to come – a portent that things would not go his way just by accident of birth. The Bible tells us that at the twin's birth, Esau came out first, but wrapped around his heel was that grasping, clutching little claw of his brother's clinging tightly to his heel. Esau had dragged his little brother kicking and screaming into the world, and he would continue to be a drag from then on.

This is not another episode of *All My Children*. It's a story about God's freedom to choose the saint or the sinner, the stalwart, the craven, the faithful or the deceitful to create the new age. Esau's and Jacob's family had long enjoyed a tradition of divine interference. Abraham had been inspired to enter self-exile from his homeland; he and Sarah had become parents ludicrously late in life; Issac had nearly become scripture's first and only child sacrifice victim, by his father, no less. Later, Rebekah and Jacob will conspire, lie, and cheat Issac out of the blessing that rightfully belongs to Esau. Esau and Jacob will enter a nearly life-long enmity.

I confess having great sympathy with Esau, and I say that as an experienced younger brother. Eldest sons and daughters are the products of inexperienced parents. Parenthood with firstborns is almost entirely in the nature of an experiment: let's see if this works . . . oops! In this case, the struggle between the twins began in the womb and continued into adulthood, a striving that took on a keener edge as the consequences grew more serious.

The story has its silly elements, what with Esau selling his birthright for a meal. What kind of hunger is it that surrenders an inheritance for a pot of beans? Each of us is a bundle of needs and hopes and dreams and guilty secrets, so Esau is certainly not the first man to be divided by love and loathing and desire and desperation, for such motivations have told the story of humankind since his time and long before.

But what do we make of the fact that this is part of the story our spiritual fathers and mothers have passed down to us of how the complex and surprising turns of events in human life become useful in the securing of God's purposes, that there is nothing we can do that can set those purposes off course. What is critical to see in this story, or in our own story, is not so much the mistaken decisions Esau, or any of us, have made, but the use God has made of those decisions.

Why Jacob and not Esau? Why not both? Why that family and not another? Why not a family like yours or mine? But that wouldn't solve the puzzle any better, would it, for we, too, and our family, as well, have our horse thieves and saints, our golden children and as well as our forgotten children. God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. In God's plan there is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future.

In asking why something happened – for instance, why Jacob and not Esau? – we focus on the past, as though if we understood the reason we would approve, as though our approval matters. It does not. What if there is no reason except God, whose ways are not our ways and whose wisdom is not our wisdom? What if we must live without the answer, except the answer of God? What if we have to simply accept the realities of life, accept that our brother, scoundrel that he is, is God's choice and we are not? What if we are a part of God's plan but not the hero part? What if we

are dealt a hand we don't particularly like? What if the Sower sows extravagantly and some seeds lie fallow for years, and some seeds germinate and take root and flourish, and yet others bake in the sun and die? Should God's choices mean we should live differently, somehow?

Esau gets my sympathy, but Jacob is better cinema. He is the anti-hero through whom God continues the story of salvation. Through this flawed man the story line established much earlier in scripture is propelled. It is not necessarily the mighty who triumph, nor necessarily the good. Even Jesus, the best of men, in whom the story of salvation culminates for the Christian, did not "win" in the customary way we think of the term. But Jacob, a man not above toying with his brother's fate, deceitful toward his blind and enfeebled father, more than equal to his uncle's conniving, and haughty and obstinate in dealing with God, lives to a ripe old age and is buried with his ancestors.

In this day of turbulence in the economy, uncertainty in government leadership, of rising anxiety and falling confidence, this may not be comforting news. We want to hear that virtue is always rewarded. We want to be reassured that enough caution, enough money, and enough weaponry will make us safe. And, we want to know that God picks and chooses based on our system of rectitude and morality. We want our vision of appropriate outcomes to prevail. We want life's dramas to be neatly wrapped up in fifty-two minutes plus commercials. Instead, we are saddled with the God who enjoys leaving loose ends, who doesn't read our directions before assembling our lives, and puts things together with parts left over.

If God's love were something that was metered out like wages, then we could count out our hours of good deeds and earn our way into heaven. If it is not like that, though, we can't play those games. We can't be in control of God's blessings. We have to trust God to do what is right, what is "right" in God's economy, not our own. It is unsettling in the extreme to consider the idea that God's ways are inscrutable and not necessarily (in our way of seeing) fair, that being good is no guarantee of being chosen, that, as Jesus says elsewhere, God sends his rain upon the just and the unjust.

If we are offended by this man Jacob and his story of reward for which we see no reason and mercy for which we see no repentance, perhaps it is because we have allowed a mechanical idea of God to be built up in us, a sense that God will deal with us according to our goodness rather than deal with us according to grace.

So, is it just possible this story is suggesting we're far better off relying on the grace of God rather than upon our good works to prove our worth? So much of the time it seems we are engrossed in guilt management, for we are people much more like Jacob and Esau and Issac and Rebekah than we might like to admit. Have we not manipulated to get our way? Have we not been shrewd when we should have been vulnerable, and have we not chosen our favorites and looked to them to reflect our love in their eyes? And do we not harbor doubts about our worthiness, knowing as we do that we are not without blemish and not without fault?

The righteousness we claim for ourselves or our viewpoints or our privileged positions are secured on very loose moral soil, we realize, and rehearsing them among like-minded friends do not make them valid. We know this deep in our hearts, I think. We know that finally we must show ourselves before the Eyes which cannot be fooled by our pretense, and that all that is true about us will be revealed, and we are utterly without claim before God if we have no claim on God's grace.

Our faith is the assurance that God is more for us than we are for ourselves, that as deep as our need is and as deep as our guilt is, or as deep as is our refusal to acknowledge our need, God's

love for us is deeper still. In ways we cannot articulate and ways we cannot fathom, God's inscrutable love reaches us even at our worst, or, more likely, at our perverse best, and we had better be thankful God is willing to be the God of scoundrels.

This learning does not come cheaply, nor does it come painlessly. The story of Jacob is a story of redemption, not of a bad person but of a typical one. Jacob was neither the worst nor the best. Yet, it is he who ultimately is given the name highest in all the Old Testament. In Genesis 32:28 we read, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Does it change our view of God's way with us to hear that the word Israel implies striving with God?

In his story we face God's inscrutable ways with us. In his story we witness extraordinary grace toward a graceless man, and so we face a love which cannot be tapped by our manipulating. In his story we see finely-wrought human systems break down, and so we learn our frailty and learn that if we are to trust at all we must trust in God.

We can speculate endlessly why some seed falls among rocks, or among weeds, or fails to find shelter from the scorching sun or the marauding birds. We can try to rationalize why Jacob was called and not Esau, why we are the way we are and not some other way, why we are here not there, why death faces us later instead of now or vice versa. We can try to weave our schemes and wrap our minds around the of God's ways, but at the last we are left to choose to respond with the men and women of ages past, who, out of lives tangled with joy and sorrow, learned to say, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Therein lies the answer to all our questions and the one thing needful to know.

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