

“Mixed Blessings”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

6-25-17

Based upon Genesis 25 and 27

Have you ever wondered what was in the stew that Jacob made, which was so good that his brother Esau was willing to trade his birthright for it? I did. I mean I knew that it was supposed to be lentil stew, but I wasn't sure what the ingredients were for that, so I looked it up. According to one website, which cited The Bible Cookbook by Marian Maeve O'Brien, a typical lentil stew in Jacob's day included red lentils, lamb, peppers, carrots, tomatoes, and onions, lots and lots of onions—about one whole onion per serving.¹ That means it was an aromatic dish to be sure, but not one which could explain Esau's impetuosity or justify his poor priorities. Still, I'm glad I looked it up because now I smell onions when I read these stories, and if you do too now because I've just shared the recipe, then that is not necessarily a bad thing because it will help us all to remember that the saga of the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau is itself much like an onion. The saga is not simply a story of a good son versus a bad son, although some have interpreted it that way, nor is it simply a story about how an ancient divine oracle was fulfilled. The “Jacob cycle,” as scholars call it, is a family saga made up of layers of lessons, which is why it could speak powerfully to our spiritual ancestors thousands of years ago, and can still speak to us today with equal force. So today, with your indulgence, instead of focusing on a single lesson as I usually do, I am going to peel off the layers one at a time because today's text is a good example of how the Bible can teach us in a multidimensional way. In the process of dissecting the onion, we will discover what this story can teach us about history, human relationships, and most importantly, the blessings of God.

Starting with the most superficial layer of the biblical onion, the first lesson in today's texts is the most academic. When scholars examine the text from a purely literary-historical approach, they see evidence of what is called “etiological tradition,” that is, evidence that the stories may have been written to explain the cause or origin of something. In the case of this story, they may have been written to explain the origin of the nations of Israel and Edom, and also why they were so often at war. Israel, you may or may not remember, is the name that God gave Jacob when he wrestled with an angel by the river Jabbok and won. That story doesn't appear until *Genesis*, chapter 32. But by the time that today's stories were written down, Jacob was known as Israel, and today's stories explain why God's promises for the nation of Israel were conveyed through him. Similarly, this story explains why Edom is associated with Esau. Edom in Hebrew sounds like the word “red” which was Esau's nickname, and the place Esau settled with his family, Seir, sounds like the word for hairy. So the red and hairy man became known as the father of the country that sounded sort of red and hairy. Finally, according to the brothers' birth story, the reason that the nations were at war during King David's reign, when the story was most likely written down, is that the two brothers who birthed the nations were themselves at war even before they were born. “You are carrying two nations in your womb, one stronger than the other. The

¹ *Esau's Pottage Meal: A Birthright Worth Beans*, Cooking With the Bible, blog, (Greenwood Pub. Inc., 2017), retrieved June 19, 2017 from <http://cookingwiththebible.com/reader/Default.aspx/GR3410-342/recipe/>. The recipe calls for 6 onions to produce six servings of stew. That's an onion a piece with some lentils and lamb around it.

elder shall serve the younger,” God tells Rebeka when she complains that the babies’ *in utero* battles were making her miserable. This suggests that people believed in David’s day that it had long been a part of God’s plan that one day Israel would trounce Edom.

Etiological tradition is interesting, but not very inspiring, in my opinion. So the next layer of the onion takes us to a more personal level by focusing on the often sinful nature of human relationships. Think of this as the psychological layer of the biblical onion. Over and over in Scripture we see brothers and sisters who compete with each other, more than love one another—Cain and Abel, Joseph and his 11 brothers, Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. We also see stories of parents who are less than ideal parents—Abraham, Sarah, and Lot, Jacob in later chapters, Jephthah, who sacrificed his own daughter because of a foolish oath that he never should have made, just to name just a few. The childhood stories of Jacob and Esau contains examples of both kinds of familial dysfunction: two brothers who cannot get along with each other from birth and two brothers whose parents love them unequally from the moment they are born. Rebeka loves Jacob more, the text says; Isaac loves Esau more.

It is tempting when we read these stories to judge the characters. “I can’t believe that Jacob would do that do his own brother!” “What kind of mother favors one child over the other so strongly that she encourages that child to deceive his father in order to take his brother’s blessing?” But familial dysfunction, unfortunately, is not really a thing of the past. I suspect that most of us know people who treat their siblings more like strangers or competitors than best friends, and we probably know some parents who clearly show preference for one of their children over others too. In *Genesis* especially, the dysfunction stories are meant to illustrate how “after the Fall” humanity failed to live and love the way that God intended us to do. They are cautionary tales written in part to illustrate the power of sin to destroy relationships, and wreak havoc on multiple generations. No one aspires to be a biased mother like Rebeka, and most of us would not like to be told we treat our siblings like Jacob and Esau treated each other. The saga of Jacob’s family, therefore, is an important psychology lesson in what not to do in your own family.

But for me, the most important lessons in Jacob and Esau’s childhood stories are the theological lessons found still deeper inside the center of the onion, the lessons about the blessings of God. These stories teach us both about how God blesses humanity and how we should respond to being blessed. According to the Jewish laws of primogeniture, Esau, as the first born son (by a second or two), was entitled to a double share of his father’s inheritance when Isaac died—a very sizable material blessing most sons would be delighted to receive (Deut. 21:15-17). This was Esau’s legal birthright. But because his father was Abraham’s son, Esau was also in line for an unsurpassed spiritual blessing. As Abraham passed on the covenant promises and blessings of God to his son Isaac, so Isaac expected to pass on God’s promises to his oldest son, Esau. Isaac expected to eat the ritual meal that his son prepared for the blessing ceremony, and then say, “Here, my son, you not only get twice the acreage that Jacob gets, the herds and the household goods, you also get the promises of God to be carried through you and passed to your children.”

There was a problem with this plan, however; it wasn’t God’s plan. God had decided that Jacob, not Esau, would be the promise-bearer. We do not know why God decided this, or whether

Rebeka ever told Jacob or Isaac about the prophecy. All we know is that God made a plan that contravened the customs of the day. This is not the only time God did this in biblical history. There is actually a recurring theme in the Bible of the firstborn sons—Ishmael, Esau, Reuben, David's oldest brother—not being chosen despite society's expectations that they would be and should be. This pattern tells us that God does not feel bound to comply with either human laws or expectations. God is especially not bound by human systems which are inherently inequitable, favoring some and disadvantaging others. As Jesus himself would say centuries later, God likes when the last become first and the least become the greatest. God likes the story of the underdog carrying the day.

Now I grant you that it doesn't really seem like Jacob was the underdog in today's stories. He seems twice as smart and six times as creative and determined as Esau was when it came to getting what he wanted. But from the perspective of the culture of his day, by virtue of being born second (even by just a few seconds), he was the underdog. In his day the privileges granted a firstborn son were like no others. Esau would have had everything he needed to be successful handed to him on a plate, while Jacob would have had to work his whole life to be able to cope. So God re-stacked the deck.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, puts it this way. He says in the Jacob cycle: "God works a basic inversion of social right. The oracle [God shares with Rebeka] discloses something crucial about God. It affirms that by the power of his [sic] promise, God is free to work his [sic] will in the face of every human convention and every definition of propriety.... Jacob is announced as a visible expression of God's remarkable graciousness in the face of conventional definitions of reality and prosperity. Jacob is a scandal from the beginning. The powerful grace of God is a scandal. It upsets the way we would organize life."²

God calls whom God wants to call and blesses whom God wants to bless. It doesn't matter if the person is a terrible sinner. It doesn't matter if society approves. What matters is that God is in control of making sure God's promises are fulfilled, not us, and God will do it God's way. Is this comforting lesson? Probably not entirely if you are a privileged person in today's society, as most of us are, because the story of Jacob's favor with God reminds us that worldly standards and privileges we enjoy are of little value to God. But the lesson is important for us to keep in mind because God's treatment of Jacob foreshadows in an almost allegorical way God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. We know that that grace benefits us all specifically because it is grounded in God's will, not our merit or status. So in a sense Jacob's scandalous blessing is our scandalous blessing as well.

As soon as we recognize that we have been blessed as Jacob was blessed, however, then this text prompts us to think about how we respond to the blessings we are given. This is the theological challenge at the center of the onion. We can see from the story of the stew that Esau did not properly value the blessings which his privileged place in society gave him. He despised

² Brueggemann, Walter, Interpretation: Genesis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 216.

his birthright. In Jewish tradition, his ingratitude, his rejection of the covenant blessings of God, is seen as so reprehensible that Esau has been transformed from an impetuous fool to a villain in their Midrash. It is almost as if they treat ingratitude as a spiritual gateway sin which leads to all sorts of crimes and offenses. The commentaries accuse Esau of being a murderer; they accuse him of taking stew Jacob had prepared for Isaac on the day that Abraham died. They accuse him of having a heartless soul as well as an empty mind all because he was ungrateful.

The stories in Jewish Midrash are not biblical in the way that Christians use that term, and in my opinion they are not really fair either. They are born more out of historic outrage that Esau went on to marry Hittite women instead of Jews than the stew incident. But Esau's behavior does still ask us to consider our own. Do we appreciate how incredibly blessed we are, we who are the "firstborns" in the world's social structure and economy? We are the 1% when it comes to the rest of the world, whether or not we are in our own nation. Do we see each day how the justice system and the economy are stacked in our favor and not in the favor of others? Do we cherish the opportunities our privileged position gives us, or do we continuously pursue instant gratification as if all that we have is inconsequential or not enough?

I know a teenager from one of the other churches I have served, who grew up in an affluent city with everything she could ever need. Like many teenagers, she focused more on what she did not have in the moment that her friends had, than she focused on practicing gratitude. Then she spent a summer working on a Lakota reservation in South Dakota. When she came back she was a changed person. "I didn't realize," she said. "I did not know how exceptionally blessed my life has been until I saw how they lived. Every suburban teenager should have to go live some place like that before they go to college. I don't see the world in the same way anymore."

And what about Jacob? In the commentaries people have made excuses for his bad behavior for centuries because he became the father of the nation we count as our spiritual ancestors. "Jacob was just fulfilling the prophecy," some have argued. "He did learn his lesson about deception later when Laban tricked him." "He clearly valued God's covenant promises to his grandfather and did not want them to be squandered." Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. But in the stories today it is clear that regardless of the nature of his motivation, Jacob took what wasn't his. He took from his own brother. He deceived his own father. He grabbed when he saw the grabbing was good. What can Jacob teach us about how feeling entitled leads us to take from our brothers and sisters around the world? What can he teach us in the church about how ugly it is when people of faith take the gift of God's grace and use it to justify an attitude of selfish spiritual entitlement? Jacob was spiritually blessed, not legally by virtue of being the younger son, but he was no more satisfied knowing that one day God would favor him, than Esau was satisfied knowing that one day his father would favor him. Jacob also wanted instant gratification. He also wanted more.

I think we are more like Jacob and Esau than we like to acknowledge. We are beloved children of God who are devoted children in many respects. But we have the ability to go through this world so focused on what we want next that we can fail to appreciate what God has already given us, and we have the ability to turn our blessings into entitlements, and use them as excuses to

justify selfish and destructive behaviors. But this does not mean we are doomed to be this way forever. Thankfully, just as we can learn from the brothers' story how not to treat our siblings and how not to parent, we can learn from their stories how not to respond to God's blessings. We can nurture grace and gratitude within us instead of greed and entitlement.

Thinking of my friend who had her eyes opened by the Native American community as well as about Jacob's enticing stew, I'm going to close today with an old Native American story because it conveys in its own way the lesson at the heart of our biblical onion today. A Cherokee elder was trying to teach his grandchildren about life. So he said, "There is a fight going on inside each of us between two wolves. One wolf represents anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, inferiority, lies, and false pride. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, gratitude, humility, kindness, generosity, compassion, and faith. Sometimes the good wolf is stronger, and sometimes the bad one." "Which one is going to win in the end?" his grandson asked. "The one you feed," the chief replied.³ May we learn from Jacob and Esau how to feed only the gratitude wolf within us, so that in our relationships with God, family, and the world, we all will be truly blessed, and God's grace will win in the end. Amen.

³ Adapted from *Animating Illustrations*, "envy", HOMILECTICONLINE, retrieved June 21, 2017 from http://www.homilecticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=envy&imageField2.x=0&imageField2.y=0