

July 16, 2017 – The Birthright

Genesis 25:19-34

“This is how little Esau valued his birthright.”

What a telling statement at the end of today’s scripture passage. We know that this mythic tale was developed over centuries of storytelling around Israelite campfires. We also know that the Israelites were the descendants of Jacob, Esau’s brother. In fact, Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, were enemies of the Israelites. So it’s not surprising that Esau is portrayed badly in this story. He is described as very ruddy, having so much hair on his body when he was born that he looked like he was wearing a fur coat. You can imagine the laughs around those campfires as the Israelites described how their ancestor had outwitted his hairy, older brother, a brother who was willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of red, lentil stew.

But, at the same time, a different version of this story was probably being told in the camps of the Edomites. We will never know how their version went... it, of course, was not even considered when the Hebrew Scriptures were finally written down. But Ralph Milton, a current-day storyteller, wrote his own version of the tale. This time from Esau’s point of view. And here it is, the story of Esau:

Do you know what it's like when you've been out in the bush all week?

And you've caught nothing. Not a thing?

Well, Jacob sure doesn't know about that. Fat, pampered mama's boy, that's what he is. Mom always liked him best. And she put him up to it. Mom is always figuring out ways to get things for Jacob. I didn't sell my birthright. I was conned. I was cheated.

Do you know what it's like when you come home, and you've been out hiking around all week? There's hardly any game, and by the time you see any, you're so weak you can't shoot straight. Sure I found a few berries to eat, but all I got out of that was a case of diarrhea.

So I come home. I can hardly walk, I'm so hungry. And Jacob has been sitting around at home with Mom, stirring a pot full of some red stuff. I don't know what it is, but I know I need it and I need it fast.

But Jacob, he's being coy. "Hey, big brother. How much will you give me for some of my stew?"

I try to grab it from him, but he jumps away. "Give me something to eat, for cryin' out loud, Jacob, I've starving!"

"So how about the inheritance, Esau. Tell me that when Pop dies, I get everything. Say that, and I'll give you some of this delicious lentil stew."

"Whatever you want. Just give me something to eat!"

That's what happened. I was cheated, right? And Jacob's been rubbing my nose in that so called promise ever since. "A promise is a promise," he keeps saying.

"Look, you pampered brat," I grabbed him by the collar and yelled right into his fat little face. "The birthright is for father to give, and father will give it to me. So stop being such a smartass!" I would have punched him in the nose but that's when mother came along.

"Esau. You let go of your brother. Just because you're older, it doesn't mean you can lord it over him."

"Well, Mom, you tell him to stop going on with that crap about me selling him my inheritance for a bowl of that red garbage he calls food."

I might as well have been talking to the tent pegs. Mom was totally on Jacob's side. "A promise is a promise, Esau," she says to me.

"Remember, your word is your bond."

I know I shouldn't have done it, but that's when I started to yell at her.

"Mom, I know Jacob is your pet. OK, but Dad is still on my side, and when the time comes, he will give the inheritance to me, and then you and this pampered pip-squeak will be out on your ear. Just remember that, Mom."

Well, I guess I told 'em. They haven't said anything about it since. And poor Dad is getting old and blind, and pretty soon it'll be time for him to pass on the family blessing to me. Then I'll show them. I'll really show them.

<http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.ca/2008/07/preaching-materials-for-july-13-2008.html>

Of course, in their story, the Edomites would focus on the betrayal, on how Jacob, and his mother, conspired against Esau. They would have put Jacob in a bad light, probably even made fun of his appearance, maybe calling him fat or small or weak, just as the Israelites had exaggerated Esau's hairy body. I'm sure Rebecca wouldn't have gone unscathed either. She did favour her younger son. There are always two sides to every story.

All you have to do is ask two siblings to describe an event in their family's history and there's a good chance you will get two very different tales. Each person remembers their family legends from their own perspective. And, as we discussed during the Community Learning Time, siblings are often very different and those differences can lead to different viewpoints. Different viewpoints can lead to major disagreements.

Families are very complicated organisms. And despite what some people will tell you, none of them are perfect. Some are more dysfunctional than others, but there is no such thing as the perfect family. Just as there is no such thing as the perfect human being.

And yet, somehow, even in our dysfunction and our imperfection, we are called to be a part of the re-creation of our world. No matter how we were brought up or even how we have brought up our own children, the Spirit is able to move through us. Look at Jacob. This manipulator, cheater and thief became the father of an entire nation of people, the twelve tribes of Israel. Through him the Hebrew people came into being. Through him came Jesus, our teacher and guide.

One thing I like about the Hebrew Scriptures is that they tell stories of real human beings, people who make mistakes in their lives... some of them really big ones. These stories teach us that God does things through the lives of the strangest and least likely of people. In story after story the protagonists are flawed human beings who lead their people well in spite of, and sometimes because of, their weaknesses.

It's not hard to think of people in our own time who have overcome difficult childhoods to make significant contributions to their communities and even nations. I'm sure you know many in your own circle of friends and acquaintances. Think of those who have experienced childhood abuse and are now advocates for child safety. Think of those who grew up in homes of alcoholics and are now working in social services. Think of the teachers in our school systems who, in their childhood, struggled with learning.

Our childhood experiences, our families of origin may impact who we are in adulthood, but they do not define us in God's eyes. Despite all our flaws, our imperfections we are all beloved children of God. Whether we believe we have anything to offer, or not, we all have a place and a role in God's world.

VU #556 Would You Bless our Homes and Families