

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 10
Genesis 25:19-34
July 16, 2017

The Odd Elect of God

Flipping through the family album can be fascinating, but embarrassing. Every Sunday, you and I open this big book and read about our ancestors in the faith. Some of them are worthy of praise – people like Moses who led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt into the promised land. David, the shepherd-king, composer of psalms and slayer of Goliath. Ruth, the foreign daughter-in-law, who refused to leave Naomi's side.

Oh, there are some great heroes and heroines in holy writ. It thrills the soul to see them here, in the family album.

But when we dig a little deeper, the halos begin to slip. It turns out Moses was a poor public speaker who tried to wiggle out of God's call to confront the Pharaoh. It seems a lot of his reluctance stemmed from the fact that he was wanted for murder back in Egypt. David, for all his charm and creativity, was an adulterer who used his high office to arrange for the death of his lover's husband. And Ruth? Well, she did what she had to do. She sneaked into Boaz' tent in the dead of night, uncovered his . . . er . . . *feet*, and let nature take its course.

And let's not forget the Apostle Paul, who in his letters to young churches is the first to admit that he began his career as a persecutor of the church.

Being a twin myself, I'm partial to another pair of faces in the family album. I refer, of course, to Esau and Jacob, whose photos also appear in textbooks under the heading "acute sibling rivalry."

According to the biblical narrator, the strained relationship between Esau and Jacob starts *in utero* and gets worse from birth onward. Esau is born first with a mop of red hair, and Jacob comes close behind, holding onto his brother's heel for all he's worth. Hence the name "Esau," which means "hairy," and Jacob," which means "heel."

"Jacob" can also mean "trickster," "usurper," "flimflam artist." Jacob was all of those, and then some.

The two siblings could not have been more different. Esau loves the outdoors. He goes out hunting for days on end, sleeping rough on the hard ground. Jacob prefers a quiet life and creature comforts. **“A quite man, living in tents,”** the text says. (For you Baby Boomers, recall the Patty Duke Show: *One pair of matching bouquets, different as night and day.*)

The twins’ parents don’t help the situation. Their father Isaac prefers Esau over Jacob because Isaac loves to eat the game that Esau brings home. And Rebekah, their mother, is partial to Jacob. Perhaps that’s because Jacob remembers to wipe his feet before he comes into the tent, or because he hangs around the tent all the time, showing an interest in cooking.

Or maybe Rebekah just loves Jacob more. I know mothers these days aren’t supposed to admit partiality, but that kind of thing happened back in Bible times. Some will tell you it still happens.

One day, Esau comes back from a hunting trip hungry as a big red bear. He sees Jacob hunched over the fire, stirring up a pot of lentils – or perhaps vegetarian chili. Who knows? Whatever it is, it smells delicious, and Esau is not good at impulse control. **“Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished.”**

“First sell me your birthright,” Jacob replies.

“I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”

So, Esau swears away his right to inherit his father’s property and, as the text says, **“sold his birthright to Jacob.”** In return, Jacob dishes up a big bowl of “red stuff” along with a couple of loaves of fresh-baked bread. Esau gobbles down the lot, rises from the table, and goes on his merry way.

“Thus, says the text, **“Esau despised his birthright.”** In the classic language of the King James Version, *he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.*

If you’re looking to make theological sense out of this story, it’s there, but you have to read between the lines. Behind this story of sibling rivalry run amok lies a promise – a promise God made long ago to Abraham and Sarah, the grandparents of Esau and Jacob. The promise came to them years after that elderly couple had sold the unused bassinet that was gathering dust in the attic and had grown used to the idea that they would never have children.

“I will make of you a great nation,” God promised. *“Through your offspring, all the nations of the earth will come to know my blessing.”*

We call that God’s “covenant” with Abraham and Sarah. From it stems the idea that God chose or “elected” a particular people to bear God’s blessing to the world. The doctrine of election is the glue that holds this family album together. It is, at the same time, the most misunderstood, and the most gracious concept in the Bible.

God *chose* – God *elected* – Israel to bear God’s blessing to the world. Not because Israel deserved to be chosen. Just look at this album. There are sinners and scoundrels on every page. Nevertheless, God chose to love these miscreants, and gave them a job to do – to bear God’s blessing to the world.

At this juncture in the story, that promise appears to be jeopardy. As the firstborn, Esau is the obvious candidate to carry Israel’s assignment into the future, but he has just sold his rightful claim to his ethically-challenged twin brother.

So, now what’s going to happen to God’s promise? Will it die with Jacob? Will God’s election die with it? Will there be no one to bear witness to the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who demands justice and loves mercy, the God who chooses **“the weak in the world to shame the strong”** (I Cor. 1:27)?

No, God is not going to let that happen. The responsibility that comes with election passes from the older brother to the younger, despite Jacob’s unsavory character. From now on, it’s the heel who will bear the promise.

Who could have guessed that a story in holy writ could be so unholy?

And here’s the kicker: *This has been God’s plan all along.* Even before these contentious twins were born, God told Rebekah,

**the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.¹**

¹ Genesis 25:23

Jacob may think he's in the driver's seat because he managed to steal the keys to the family car, but he's not. He may think he's free to cheat his brother and steal his birthright, and I suppose, at some level he has a kind of freedom. But he is also *chosen* -- destined by God. "His freedom is bounded by the choices God has already made on his behalf."² Jacob is God's elect whether he knows it or not.

This is a scandalous story, not just because the hero is a heel, or because the parents of these twins so blatantly play favorites. It's scandalous because God is also playing favorites. God is choosing to defy convention and legal precedence. God is choosing the younger over the older, the last over the first. God is reversing the polarities of conventional wisdom. God is turning the world upside down.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "Jacob is a scandal from the beginning. The powerful grace of God is a scandal. It upsets the way we would organize life."³

By the same scandalous grace that makes a heel like Jacob the bearer of God's promise, you and I are also elected. We are called -- not because we are worthy of God's call, but because God is God. Our election is not for *privilege*, as we so often assume, but for *service*. In service to God, we are called to pay particular attention to the way that God continues to choose the last to be first, the weak to overrule the strong, the proud to be scattered "**in the imagination of their hearts.**"⁴

The Apostle Paul put it this way, "**God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing the things that are.**"⁵ If you want to know how far God will go to accomplish this, look no further than the cross of Jesus Christ.

In these times, when elected officials mistake success in the polls for a mandate to exploit the poor and ignore the plight of the "least of these" – when senators offer their constituents a mess of pottage instead of genuine health care coverage, when lies become the order of the day and each news cycle brings more evidence of wrongdoing – you and I need to remember that we are elected, too.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982) 216

³ Brueggemann, 217

⁴ Luke 1:51

⁵ I Cor. 1:28

We are elected to speak the truth to power, to stand with prisoners and outcasts, to remember the poor, and to hold one another -- including our leaders -- accountable. The accountability we are called to uphold is not to the polls, or to the packs, or the fawning crowd of sycophants stirring up the pottage. We are accountable to God, who knows us to be frauds and sinners, yet loves us as God loves the world. We are accountable to the God who demands that we do better.

As God's elect, we are an odd choice, but then again, we serve an odd God -- the God who keeps God's promises. The God who will never let us go.

I wouldn't want to be the family therapist assigned to sort out Esau, Jacob, Isaac, and Rebecca. But they're family, nonetheless -- God's scandalous elect. God stuck with them through thick and thin, and God promises to do the same with us.