

A Strange Way of Blessing

Fifth in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of
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by
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Genesis 27:1-45

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” ²He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. ⁴Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.” ⁵Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷‘Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.’ ⁸Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. ⁹Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; ¹⁰and you shall take it to your father to

eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.”¹¹ But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, “Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin.¹² Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.”¹³ His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me.”¹⁴ So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved.¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob;¹⁶ and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck.¹⁷ Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

¹⁸ So he went in to his father, and said, “My father”; and he said, “Here I am; who are you, my son?”¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me.”²⁰ But Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?” He answered, “Because the LORD your God granted me success.”²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.”²² So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him.²⁴ He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.”²⁵ Then he said, “Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son’s game and bless you.” So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank.²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come near and kiss me, my son.”²⁷ So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.²⁹ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

³⁰ As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting.³¹ He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, “Let my father sit up and eat of his son’s game, so that you may bless me.”³² His father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am your firstborn son, Esau.”³³ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? —yes, and blessed he shall be!”³⁴ When Esau heard his father’s words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, me also, father!”³⁵ But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.”³⁶ Esau said, “Is he not rightly

named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” ³⁷Isaac answered Esau, “I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?” ³⁸Esau said to his father, “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. ³⁹Then his father Isaac answered him: “See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. ⁴⁰By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

⁴¹Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” ⁴²But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. ⁴³Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, ⁴⁴and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away— ⁴⁵until your brother’s anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?”

Throughout this sermon series on the formative narratives of God’s interaction with the first family of faith, we have hung on to this mantra: God called the family of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants – in order that through them *all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. And I have asked us, repeatedly, to consider how we ourselves are called to be instruments of God’s blessing.

In a time when fear of the other is pervasive; poverty eats away at human life the world over; and racism and intolerance are rampant realities, how do we convey God’s intention of abundant life for all? So, on World Communion Sunday, when we imagine gathering with Christians of every race and nation around a common table, we have this story about the First

Family of Faith falling apart over a bowl of stew. The challenge for us today is to wend our way through: sibling rivalry of the worst kind of hatred, parents choosing favorites, lies, trickery, theft and deceit to discover the providence of God. For post-modern listeners who care about fairness and equality in child-rearing, the story is hard to hear.

The original Hebrew grammar intensifies the drama and is echoed in the English; every pronoun describes Jacob as “her” child, Rebekah’s child. Every pronoun describes Esau as “his” child, Isaac’s child. And they are twins! The names carry meaning: Esau means “hairy” – he’s the father’s outdoorsy, hunting child; and Jacob means over-reacher, supplanter, heel just as he grabbed his brother’s heel in the womb to pull himself beyond his firstborn brother. The story shows human nature in the raw, with all its weakness and sinfulness, and without drawing clear moral lines.

As I worked to find a good word for us in this difficult text, I kept coming back to the fact that this is one of the stories I remember best from my early days in Sunday School. The more uncomfortable I found myself with this family scenario, the more I wondered: What on earth was I taught about this awful story and what it means when I was a child? So, I went to my bookshelf, pulled off the Presbyterian Covenant Life Curriculum book for children in Kindergarten and First grade in the mid-1960’s and I found “God and His People” and looked it up. After paraphrasing the story, pretty close to the biblical account, the author summed it up saying: “That is how Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew... and Jacob tricked Esau out of his blessing... Now these two men were both selfish and spoiled. Esau did not care about his family responsibilities, and Jacob was dishonest and cheated his brother. The brothers became enemies and hated one another, and Rebekah their mother was very, very sad...”

Selfish and spoiled.... A dishonest cheater... Back in the 1960’s there was not a lot of sugar-coating the scripture for first graders.... The author of that children’s book, by the way, was Mary Winston Norfleet, my mother! Now, Mom didn’t leave it there in her children’s book, what she did was continue that same chapter with the story about Jacob’s dream, and concluded

saying, “But before Jacob really became what God wanted him to be, many years passed. Jacob had to work very hard, and Jacob had to learn to love and trust God.”¹

We’ll get to Jacob’s dream next Sunday, but in the meantime today we are stuck with a difficult passage of scripture, in which God is never named, and yet there are signs that God is all wrapped up in the drama of this thick conspiracy. God uses these flawed people for the purposes of passing divine blessing on, from one generation to the next, until the whole earth will be blessed. What this story tells us is within the tradition of our biblical heritage God moves against the grain of normal, cultural practice from the very beginning.

In Isaac’s historical setting, the firstborn son always received the family inheritance. That’s not what happens here. In Rebekah’s historical setting women were powerless property of their husbands. That’s not what happens here. And sadly here, father Isaac, who was named for his mother Sarah’s laughter, favors a child whose pivotal line in the story is “Esau cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry.” How quickly we have moved from laughter to tears. When we consider the sadness of it, the deceit, parents favoring one child over another, you cannot help but wonder how God chooses to be God. God is never the God we human creatures would fashion for ourselves.

Ingolf Dalferth is professor of systematic theology at the University of Zurich. He writes about the challenge for people of faith who live in an age of what he calls “cafeteria religion.” By such a designation he suggests that we live in a time when so much is laid out for us to choose from that we would just assume choose the qualities and characteristics of our God. Like a cafeteria. According to the Bible, however, who we want God to be exactly is never the God who really is. “My God isn’t God, and neither is yours,” he says. Faith has reason, “but its reason is not neutral, universal, or disinterested, but engaged, public, and self-critical.” And then the professor

¹ Mary Winston Crockett Norfleet, “God and His People,” p. 12ff.

offers this advice: “Preserve the distinction between your understanding of God – and God. And deepen your understanding of God by keeping company with God, because the reality of God does not disclose itself in abstraction, but only in the exercise of one’s own worship of God.”²

My friends, we worship and keep company with God by gathering around strange stories like this one in which God is frequently doing the unexpected thing. Where the elder is customarily pre-ordained to certain rights, God helps make a deal to bless the younger. Where women had little power, Rebekah coerced a rigid patriarchal system to bless her favored, younger son, and God was all over it. Where the younger was supposed to have no inheritance, Jacob got it all. The mercy in it for us is the knowledge that, when held up against the ways of the world, where those in power often get what they want on the backs of the less powerful – God will continue to do the unexpected thing.

C.K. Chesterton, British intellectual, author, and a reluctant convert to Christianity, once said: “Christianity had turned the world upside-down, and from that perspective, the world had suddenly started to make sense.”³ Jesus put it this way: The first shall be last, and the last first.

That is why gathering in faith, around ancient biblical stories like this one, is so important during our uncertain times. Odd as this old story of Jacob and Esau may be, it is also filled with hope that God acts in ways not of this world, indeed, often turning the world upside down in order for God’s ways to make sense. Part of what that means is, ironically, those who are blessed by God are also given a heavy burden. Jacob will spend the rest of his days dealing with the consequences of his deception of Esau, and as the blessing passes from his generation to the next he will shoulder a heavy burden of assuring it continues to expand among God’s people. So, we – who claim

² From *Context*, Martin Marty, Editor, date misplaced.

³ C.K. Chesterton quoted in Michael Lindvall’s sermon, “Spiritual Intelligence,” 9/19/99, First Presbyterian, Ann Arbor.

ourselves heirs to this blessing also have the burden of seeing to its expansion; we too are called to participate in the blessing of the families of the earth.

Preaching professor, Fred Craddock, was once a keynote speaker for an event at Clemson University. Before his lecture a young woman was to begin the program with a devotional. Craddock wrote that – she was an earnest looking young woman, and when she approached the microphone he could see that she had a yellow legal pad which had a lot of writing on it. “Uh oh,” Craddock thought, “we’re here for the night.” She began softly, in what he thought was a foreign language, and then another language, and then another one... and on and on it went. About the same length in words, a short phrase with a similar cadence, he realized she was saying one sentence in forty or fifty different languages of the world... the one sentence that is said perhaps more than any other sentence in the world. When she got to German and Spanish and French, Craddock began to recognize what she was saying and why. The last time she said it in English: “Mommy, I’m hungry,” and then she sat down. ⁴

Over a simple meal, God is at work – amid sibling rivalry, and dysfunctional families, and nations vying for power all over the world. The God who called Abraham and Sarah and promised them land, prosperity, and abundant life said that the blessing bestowed upon them was to be a blessing for everyone. So today, we too are called to a global table of fellowship – to be fed – so that we can go into the world and respond to the cries of children who say every day: Mommy, I’m hungry.

“I will bless you,” God promised, “so that in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

AMEN.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Cheery Log Sermons*.