

Birthrights

Preached FCCW Virtual Worship August 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31

Don't ever let anyone tell you that the Bible is nothing but dull stories about fuddy-duddies and do-gooders. Anyone who says that has obviously never actually read the Bible. And they have certainly never heard about Jacob. Jacob was as cunning and calculating of a con-man as you would find anywhere. A scoundrel who never let a moral principle or a twinge of conscience stand between him and anything he really wanted in life.

And he was that way literally right out of the gate. Jacob was a twin; his brother's name was Esau. Esau was born first, but with Jacob grasping onto Esau's heel, as if trying to be the first one out of their mother's womb. Despite Jacob's attempt to hold him back, Esau was born first. But that was the last time he ever bested Jacob at anything.

One advantage to being the first-born son was that Esau was entitled to a double share of the family inheritance. One day, Esau came in from the fields feeling famished. Jacob was strategically positioned to greet him with a stew on the fire. Appealing to his brother's stomach over his good sense, Jacob manipulated Esau into selling Jacob his birthright for a bowl of the stew and some bread.

On another occasion, Jacob took advantage of his father's old age and blindness to steal a blessing that was meant for Esau. While Esau was out hunting, Jacob disguised himself as his older brother and tricked Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. When Esau discovered that Jacob had cheated him again, he vowed to get revenge on his brother. So, Jacob ran for his life to the home of his uncle Laban. Jacob again prospered, this time by cheating Laban out of much of his livestock.

You can see that Jacob's methods worked pretty well for him. As long as they did, he didn't have much incentive to change. And isn't that the way it is for us, too? So long as the way things are works for our benefit we aren't any more likely than Jacob was to see a need for change.

On the journey from Laban's land to the place he came from, Jacob was warned that Esau was headed his way, with a small army. Certain that his brother intended vengeance against him, Jacob sent ahead of him everything he had acquired by hook or by crook; his flocks, his servants, even his wives and children, in the hope that Esau would be appeased and show him mercy.

Call it karma. Call it his chickens coming home to roost. Call it justice. Call it whatever you want, his finally having to face the consequences of his bad behavior towards his brother drove Jacob to his knees in a prayer for God to deliver him from Esau's wrath.

In the darkness by the river, a mysterious person showed up and wrestled with Jacob, all through the night. Some say it was an angel that Jacob wrestled. Jacob was convinced that it was God. Some believe the whole episode was just a metaphor for Jacob's intense struggling with his own God-awakened conscience. Whatever it was, Jacob refused to surrender until he got a blessing from his adversary. But for once, this wasn't a blessing he could gain by trickery.

"What is your name?" the stranger asked. And he answered, "Jacob."

Years before, when Jacob masqueraded as Esau, his weak-eyed father had asked him that same question. "What is your name?" That time, Jacob lied, in order to steal a blessing to which he had absolutely no legitimate claim. "I am Esau," he answered.

This time, though, Jacob spoke truthfully. "I am Jacob," he said. The literal translation of Jacob's name means "someone who takes the place of another by scheming or trickery." Jacob's whole life history up to that moment was summed up in that name. But God said to him, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel." The Hebrew meaning of the name Israel is "Triumphant with God."

God gave him a new name, and along with it, a chance to break with the self-serving dishonesty of his past and forge a new future with a new identity. Jacob named the spot where all this took place Peniel, which means, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." And once Jacob recognized God's face in the mysterious stranger that he had contended with, and who had shown him mercy, he was finally able to see it in the face of his brother, to whom he had showed little mercy.

The reunion that Jacob feared would be a moment of retribution, turned out instead to be an unexpected reconciliation. Esau put aside his desire for revenge and embraced Jacob as a true brother. Jacob responded by saying, "truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God." From that point on not another word was ever written about Jacob to suggest that he continued to profit from taking unfair advantage of Esau, or anyone.

To my knowledge, nobody hearing this sermon has gotten to where they are by consciously cheating someone else of their birthright. But the truth is that almost every one of us have benefitted from systems into which we were born which have delivered blessings into our laps while diminishing the birthrights of others to equal opportunities. When we are willing to be honest about how we have been beneficiaries of a birthright of skin color, religion or sexual orientation that marks some lives as mattering more than others...

When we are able to acknowledge the injustices suffered by the brothers and sisters for whom the advantages *we* enjoy have come to us through a denial of *their* birthrights to share equitably in those privileges...

When we can look into their faces, see the face of God, and in seeing God's face, also see them as truly our equals... maybe at long last we will work side by side to achieve reconciliation and justice for all.