

July 12, 2020
Two Brothers, One Birthright
Annette Hill Briggs
Genesis 25:19-34

The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob

¹⁹ These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

*"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."*

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Esau Sells His Birthright

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Despite the title, today's sermon is brought to you by the letter P. You are invited to list all the "P" words as you hear me say them. In the 1960s a white church in our town had a statement on their sanctuary wall that went something like this: "*Christ died for all; thus, all men are broth-ers.*" At the time it was a bold statement of racial justice. But times change and it began to seem too sexist to keep it on the sanctuary wall. Feminism notwithstanding, I think a case could be made to keep it. Brothers do have such a

terrible time of it. Some of the worst injuries I ever heard of were inflicted by brothers playing or fighting with each other.

My husband put his little brother in the dryer once. His brother loved the WWF, and body-slammed him so hard, my husband thought his back was broken. They were in their twenties. I know three brothers whose mom caught them jumping out of an upstairs window to practice different falls, always making the little one go first. Literature has not yet exhausted the topic – all that love and jealousy and rage between brothers, the bottomless competition for the father's approval and affection.

Outside the Bible, John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* has to be the best American novel on the subject of brothers, and it borrows from the Bible copiously. My son Ben said that finishing it is sad because you know no other novel will ever be as good. The brothers in Steinbeck's story all have names beginning with "C" and "A" for Cain and Abel. But "J" and "E" work equally well. Jacob and Esau, a template for all brothers, bound by blood and otherwise, in a world with just one birthright. I plan to spend three weeks in the Jacob and Esau story – the story of birthright and brothers; what it might have to say to people who have chosen the gospel of Jesus Christ as the story of our lives.

It hardly ever happens this way but, I was doodling around with sermon ideas Friday morning and in that net of purple ink the words *primogeniture*, *pregnancy* and *porridge* were sitting there like three little candy Easter eggs tied up with a bow. *Primogeniture* is just what it sounds like: the *primacy of being born first, the firstborn of the same two parents*. In the Genesis narrative, *primogeniture* goes by the name *birthright* – the rights to which one is entitled by virtue of being born first. Those rights consist mainly of privilege, power and property. Each one of those – privilege, power, and property – contains a great deal more rights in and of itself.

As the story of these brothers will show, birthright is both a gift and a terrible burden. Biblically, the birthright belongs to the oldest son in a family. But as Numbers 27 details, God is clear that daughters without brothers are entitled to their father's property. The fact that people didn't follow the Bible doesn't mean the Bible doesn't say it.

As Isaac's firstborn son, Esau would inherit all of the promises, privileges and power of Abraham along with two-thirds of his possessions – possessions that had greatly increased in value over Abraham's lifetime and will again in Isaac's. It was the way of things in the Bible that the older got the most. Just the way things were – and are still, lots of places, in lots of families.

Esau was born with his brother's handprint on his heel, making him firstborn by no more than a minute or two. Say what we will about Jacob, he was scrappy. He was grabbing for the birthright before he could breathe.

The Bible is big on barrenness, because in the Bible pregnancy isn't a biological predicament but a theological one. Pregnancy results not from procreation but from Divine promise and faithful prayer. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. This is how Bible babies get made, how Bible people become parents.

And while she may have prayed for a baby for twenty years, Rebekah didn't even have one before she was praying the universal prayer of parenting, *"If it is to be this way, why do I live?"* The sentence takes many forms: *These kids are going to be the death of me; I don't know why I bother; Are you kidding me; Never mind, I'll be fine; I can't have anything nice.* Her baby tumbled and kicked her so much, Rebekah didn't even know she was praying, until God answered. Not with a promise this time, but with a proclamation, a prophecy if you will: the truth at hand, in her belly, coming into the world.

Verse 23:

*"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."*

And when she delivered, it was twins, which explained all the kicking and pressure, her heartburn and backache. I wonder how long it took to realize only one of her kids caused most of those pregnancy problems? 95 percent of her pregnancy problems? Weeks, probably, if that. Jacob was probably a picky eater. (We know Esau wasn't.) I bet he was a fussy baby and a terrible toddler. The Bible says he was Rebekah's favorite, which isn't surprising at all. He needs her more, so she worries about him more. She's the one who sees him banging his head against an unlocked door, always making everything harder than it has to be. She's the one who sees his sadness and disappointment, when other people only see his deceit and his rage – like with the porridge, the red lentil stew Jacob had ready the exact moment his brother would come home starving – this word for "red" being one of those Hebrew play-on-a-word moments we don't understand when reading in English. The essence of which is that Esau was too simple-minded to realize what is happening to him, while everyone listening does understand and has a glorious laugh along with Jacob. Which just makes the prank that much meaner, but also funnier. But also sadder.

The boys had to be teenagers at this point, young men. So no way could this have been Jacob's first mean trick. Nor the last. How was Esau to know it was the one that would break everything? His own heart first of all; and his father's. Break up his family, to keep him from killing Jacob. All that comes later. All because, the Bible says – or will say

– God meant Jacob to have the birthright’s worth. Even now, for all his trickery, only Jacob seems to know the birthright’s worth.

Esau just wanted to eat. And the Bible says *Esau despised his birthright*. “Despised” is tricky. “Hated” isn’t quite right. He *hated* Jacob. Instead of *despised*, Eugene Peterson translates the word *shrugged off*. *He shrugged off his rights as the firstborn*. He didn’t care about it. *Didn’t care about it*, not as if it were not important, but rather as if it were something presumed, this destiny of privilege and power and property. He could leave it lying around, knowing it would be there when he needed it.

Everyone knew whose it was. As much as his hand or his foot, it belonged to him. Trading it for porridge was just another one of his brother’s stupid pranks. He has no idea, of course, how wrong he is. *Birthright* may sound redundant to Esau, and to his parents for that matter, but only because they’d never been invited to imagine otherwise – or don’t realize they’ve already been informed otherwise in their own prayers some fifteen or twenty years earlier, back when they discovered pregnancy to be a theological predicament. And *birthright* itself was not a thing, remember? *The elder shall serve the younger*. God said that, thus rendering the word ***birthright*** an oxymoron.

There are no rights attached to birth order, as far as God is concerned. No privilege, no power, no property – essentially a dismantling of life as they knew it, had they believed and acted accordingly. But naturally, they didn’t. Instead, they did – what? They did what people benefitting from the system always do: they blamed Jacob. Jacob the problem. Jacob the trickster. Jacob the troublemaker. Jacob the agitator. Jacob the liar. Jacob the cheater. In a system wherein no matter how good he was, Jacob was never going to reap the benefits of that system, Jacob figured out how to work that system to his own advantage.

I kid you not, this happened on Friday as I sat in my bedroom writing this sermon. My high school friend Alan, a woodworker, made and sent me this picnic table which I filled with seed for the squirrels on my deck. This squirrel’s name is Pancake, because he lies flat as a pancake to take his naps after he eats copious amounts of seeds. He gets the table and the seed and the shade and the water for free. But when another squirrel comes along, what does Pancake do? Yep. He is a selfish jerk. The other squirrel gets the crumbs that fall from Pancake’s table.



He has no prior privilege or power. The seed is a gift – to him, to his brother, to the birds, even to a raccoon. And yet, here's Pancake, in the middle of the table, as though getting there first gives him the right to decide who else is welcome. I expect you get the point. The only thing new going on in this Bible text is our recognition that nothing new is going on here.

As the wise women of Thursday Bible chat said, This has something to do with Jesus, I can tell. The one who says the first shall be last, who also told a story about two brothers, who focused on the shady younger one; who struggled to get his own listeners to imagine a God who sided with the poor and the prisoner, the last, the lost, the least and the left behind. To believe that the word said they matter more to God than property or power or privilege, and that anybody who wanted to be in his party better get that straight. You bet brothers and birthright has to do with Jesus.