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Genesis 25:19-34
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Messy Life: Family

Genesis 25:19-34

New Revised Standard Version

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 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. 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."

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 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.

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

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

There is an old joke about three ministers. A Baptist minister and a Roman Catholic priest were fishing in a boat together along with a Lutheran minister. The Roman Catholic priest and the Lutheran minister got to talking about their life challenges. "I confess," the Roman Catholic priest said "that I have a terrible problem with alcohol. I'm drunk most of the week and I worry that my bishop will find out and take me out of my parish." "Well, you think that's a problem," the Lutheran minister said, "I've got an even worse problem. I've been stealing money from the church funds and I'm terrified that the police will find out and I'll go to jail." Finally, they turned to the Baptist minister and asked, "what's your life challenge?" "Oh, I dare not tell you," the Baptist minister replied. "Come on" the Roman Catholic priest and the Lutheran minister chimed in together, "we've told you our deepest and darkest secrets." "All right," the Baptist minister replied, "my worst sin is that I love to gossip and I can't wait until we get home!"

People are messy, aren't they? We gossip, we hurt one another, sometimes even maliciously. It can be so tempting to be a Christian on your own, without community. But, we need community to receive encouragement and strength through the other members of our church. This past Friday our own Margie Holman turned 97. Margie's faith helps me in my faith.

For the next few weeks, we are going to be looking at the story of Jacob. The story of Jacob and Esau begins with a struggle which sets up this story of a conflicted family. Even through Jacob's messy life, God is at work in and through it all. In May, Sherry Koeninger sent me some notes that she had taken from a Diane Sawyer special called, "Our New Reality." Her notes included wonderful nuggets like, "The obstacles in our path ARE the path ... We will discover our strength together, one step at a time ... Humanity can rise up from this experience and generate a better world." I needed that reminder that we will get through this time. When life is messy, I need reminders from other people that we will make it through.

Jacob's story is messy. His life is all about obstacles. It is a story that reminds us that family conflicts have far-reaching consequences. What we, the people of God, do with the conflicts we encounter is the question. Jacob and Esau have struggled their entire lives. There is this vivid image of their delivery, so even from birth they have been wrestling.

You hear about twins that share a special bond with a secret language and a fierce devotion to each other. Esau and Jacob are not those kind of twins. They look differently and they have very different personalities. Their entrance into the world was defined by their differences, not their shared values or the things that they had in common.

The boys grow up and Esau is a hunter who likes to be outside while Jacob is not. I love how we are told that Jacob is quiet. It reminds me of that great book written by Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Esau is his dad's favorite and Jacob is his mom's favorite. I remember talking with Clyde Thompson about having two kids. Clyde said that his kids would often ask him who was his favorite. He would tell them that he did have a favorite, but it would change. Sometimes it would change multiple times in a day!

Jacob is cooking a stew and Esau is hungry. Jacob says he will give Esau some food if Esau will sell him his birthright since he was born first. Esau is so hungry he is willing to do anything to get that stew. Esau gives his birthright to Jacob. This is why you should never buy groceries when you're hungry. We will put things in that cart that we know won't help our diet or our budget, but when you're really hungry, the temptation can be too great to overcome. That is how hungry Esau is. He is starving and willingly gives up his birthright to get food.

Even though he was born second, we know of Jacob as the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. By upsetting Esau's status as the firstborn son, he subverted the social customs and expectations that would favor the firstborn. Ancient Israel said that the firstborn son was favored, simply because they were born first. The firstborn son would take over their father's profession. The firstborn son would become the family patriarch and inherit a larger portion of the family wealth. The second son had no privileges. The second son would have to depend on the mercy of the older brother or make his own way in the world.

Jacob is typecast as this underdog character who uses his wit and cunning to challenge the custom of the day. Jacob knows his brother Esau. He knows Esau prefers immediate gratification over the long-term benefits of his birthright. Esau loses track of what is important in the long term and Jacob exploits his brother's short sidedness.

Since Jacob won the birthright, we see Esau as less than Jacob. Esau after all was hungry and hairy. We may think that there is only one blessing to receive, there is only one birthright to be given. We might want to rush in and make sure that no one else gets it. Or we might be like Esau, ready to give up everything for the quick reward. Inheritance battles often have winners and losers. There is the person who received what they were looking for and the person who is left feeling like they lost the blessing of their loved one.

There are times when what looks like a great trade at the time ends up being something that actually moves us away in our relationship with Christ. Esau gave up who he was as the firstborn and by making the trade he was making himself something other than who he truly was. He was accepting a false identity over a true identity. You are a child of God made in God's image. We were created to live our lives in such a way that we are always reflecting God's glory back onto God. That is worship. We are also reflecting God's glory back into the world. That is service. We were created for worship and service, but sometimes we forget. We trade away our true identity and accept a false reality that is not who we were created to be.

I hope during this time of isolation that you have felt connected because we need that reminder that we are not alone. Have you heard the story of the farmer who was getting tired of farming? He contacted a realtor to help him sell his property. The realtor asked the farmer to describe his farm so that he would be able to put a description of the farm in the newspaper.

The farmer said, "Well, I have 100 beautiful acres with a fenced in meadow, a freshly painted barn with plenty of storage. A meandering stream runs through the green meadow and there's even a couple of acres of wooded land." The realtor thanked the farmer for the information and she said this will appear in tomorrow's newspaper and hopefully this will catch a prospective buyer's eye. Around the middle of the morning the next day, the realtor received a phone call from the farmer. The farmer said, "I changed my mind. I don't want to sell my farm." The realtor asked why and the farmer said, "I read the description of the farm that was in the newspaper and I decided that this is just the kind of farm that I've always wanted to have! I just didn't realize until now, that this is the farm I've always wanted."

Esau had the birthright but he didn't value it and he gave it away. The farmer didn't value his farm until it was almost gone. May we appreciate this one precious gift of life that we have been given by God. Let us not give it away or let it languish. May we remain faithful to God throughout the many conflicts and obstacles we face. Thanks be to God, Amen.