

In the Red
Genesis 25:19-34
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Well, the deadline for filing income tax returns in the United States is recently come and gone as of the 15th of April. Some businesses will end up in the black, and some in the red, at least for tax reporting purposes. “In the black” means you have made a profit or are getting ahead, and “in the red” means that you have taken a loss, or are running a deficit. The term, “in the red,” comes from the days of accounting before computers when accountants would write the loss or deficit figures in bright red ink, and all the rest in black. They wanted to make sure you noticed what was happening to your finances. Isn’t red the color we use to raise the alarm? Maybe they used it to suggest that the company was bleeding.

It may have been one of those reasons, but maybe it goes back even further, maybe even all the way back to Genesis, to this story of Jacob and Esau, and the deficit the latter put himself in by making a pretty bad transaction, the famous birthright for a pot of red stew. Red, of course, is Esau’s color on many levels. He comes out of the womb red, and becomes the father of the nation of Edom, the word for which means red. And in between is this episode of the red stew and him going into the red in the relationship with his brother. When he really realized what he had done, he probably got “red in the face” with embarrassment. And he got so angry with Jacob that he wanted to kill him, so he was “seeing red,” as the saying

goes. For Jacob, securing the birthright was a red-letter day. All in all, there's no better color to describe poor Esau.

More specifically, Esau was "in the red" with respect to his brother because what he sold for that pot of red stew was of real value on more than one level. The firstborn son was to receive the role of head of the family upon the death of the father, and that meant the power to make decisions, and arrange marriages, and make alliances, and all the rest. And so Esau has subjected himself to Jacob in this way. What's more, the firstborn, or at least the holder of the birthright, would receive a double portion of whatever the economic value of the estate was, in livestock, slaves, land, and all the rest. In other words, if Jacob was to get one share, Esau would get two. So with the sale of the birthright, there was now this reversed relationship both in power and economic terms. It is no wonder that the story ends with the editorial comment that "Esau despised his birthright."

To despise, means, of course, to look down upon something, and see it of little value, to hold it in contempt. Maybe Esau was just counting sheep and the difference between two and one wasn't big enough for him to worry about. Maybe he didn't want to be bothered with being the one in charge, but to just be free to go out and hunt as he loved to do. But more likely it was that Esau didn't know the true value of his father's holdings: that they contained not just the responsibility for the immediate or even extended family, but the promise of generations given to his grandfather Abraham. Yes, it was the spiritual inheritance of an entire people-to-be

that Esau despised along with whatever else he was willing to give up for that pot of red stew.

We don't talk so much about a birthright much anymore, and few people practice the kind of preferential birthright on Jacob and Esau's time. The wise parent these days wouldn't dream of distributing an estate unequally, or at least not announcing ahead of time that one would get more than another. These days, we'd probably say that a child's birthright is something like love and nurture, and that such a thing belongs to all children, not just the firstborn. In practice, we may preference one child over others, but in principle we would never admit to it believing it is a good idea.

In terms of our faith, we barely have grounds to suggest we have rights of any kind before God, seeing as how it's only by God's grace and mercy that we are considered children of God at all, that we have any future or acceptance, much less one with benefits. And if there's a firstborn in the conversation, it's Jesus, not any of us. But that same grace and mercy do make us children to whom something has been given, to whom much has been given, even while the Father is still around. We've been given life, and love, and grace, and wisdom, and joy, and generosity among other characteristics. These are the assets of God, the goods of the kingdom, the eternal estate. As adopted children of God, we enjoy these benefits from the very beginning, and we don't have to wait until sometime in the future. We don't need to plot against one another to get a greater share. We don't need to make

allies to make sure we stay in the will. The inheritance we receive is without limit. It never gets held up in court. There are no surprises upon the reading of the will. Everything we've been promised we have already received. But we can still despise it.

I'm not sure what the going rate for a birthright is these days, but it can't be much more than a pot of red stew. Maybe it's a Starbuck's Latte, or a box of donuts from Pricemart, or, if you are one of my kids, a new video game for the iPad. Of course, it's not a simple, one-time transaction, like it was for Esau, but rather, it's the daily collection of transactions or tradeoffs or compromises we make that erode our sense of value of our spiritual birthright. By the end of childhood, we are so deep in the red that it's almost impossible to get back to the black. It takes a lot of lessons about sharing to do battle with the power of the McDonald's Happy Meal. And then come those years of establishing ourselves, and convincing ourselves that there is plenty of time left for getting back to basics. Who has time for worrying about other people when I have so much preparation to do for my life, my career, my family? And then there's the beginning of the end when we start trying to make up for lost time. Have I saved up enough for retirement? Is that arthritis coming on? Every stage of our lives has its pot of red stew to offer us in exchange for the gifts God has given us. Every day is a new opportunity to despise that birthright.

And those are just the individual, practical, daily ones. Then there are the giant, existential ones, the ones that sometimes we participate in without even recognizing it, like when we exchange fear or despair for violence, or when we trade other people's lives for power and security, or when we dump garbage in someone else's property to keep our own looking nice. These we often do together as families, and cultures and even as churches. Like Esau, we may end up with plenty in our bellies or our bank accounts, but not much in our souls or spirits.

A few weeks ago, the church council brought before you news that ECF was modestly in the red with respect to the budget. Our fiscal year closed a few days ago on April 30 and our Treasurer waited with baited breath to see how we would end up the year: in the red or in the black. I am pleased to report that although we did not quite make it into the black, you still responded magnificently and the red ink is but a tiny trickle compared to the river it was a few months ago. Your birthright remains in your own hands and with it we can continue to be a blessing to our community. As a fellowship, we gave well over twenty percent of our offerings to ministries outside our church, and let me tell you that this is no small feat. Few and far between are churches that can do this. It is not to say that churches that do less than we can have sold their birthright, but it does speak to how hard it is, and how faithful you are. Each and every year you persevere. Each and every year you help us stay in the red.

Stay in the red? Stay in the red? Shouldn't we be in the black? Well, yes and no. It is good for churches to be solvent, but not too solvent. You see, if we were in the black all the time, I suspect we'd start to get complacent. We'd stop stretching and growing. We'd start trying to make ourselves comfortable instead of making others comfortable. We'd preach a gospel of prosperity instead of a gospel of service. We'd teach our kids that grace is found in a Happy Meal box instead of at the Lord's Table. No, the trick is to push ourselves each and every day, and each and every year to be as close to the edge of solvency as possible, to have one foot in the red and one foot in the black so that we keep striving to live out our birthright instead of selling it. You see, a believer, a family, a church can survive being in the red financially, but it will not survive long being in the red spiritually, and that's right where we'll be if our generosity can't keep pace with our call to be the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ. We'll live in the red spiritually if we live in the black financially.

The Lord's Table is a great reminder of this reality. It is a table of abundance to be sure, but there's not much here, is there, except bread and red? We could make it an elaborately decorated table complete with the finest wine and the fanciest bread, but wouldn't that betray our birthright? It's just Hollywood, but remember the end of that Indiana Jones movie about the Holy Grail, the lost cup that Christ supposedly used at the last supper. Both Indiana Jones and the bad guy end up in a roomful of cups, one of which is the Holy Grail, and while the bad guy

chooses a jewel encrusted golden chalice fit for a king, Indiana Jones chooses the carpenter's wooden cup. It's not hard to see who made the right choice. As we come to the table tonight, let us remember the choice God made for us in Jesus Christ, the one that gives us our birthright and the grace to choose to live it out generously. Amen.