

“Jacob’s Guile, God’s Grace”
Genesis 25:19-34
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When I was a child, one of my mother’s meals that I enjoyed the most was one called Jacob’s Guile, a stew of lentils and vegetables, the name of which was taken from tonight’s passage, in which an ignorant and greedy Esau exchanges the bulk of his father’s immense wealth for a simple meal not unlike the one my mother used to make. While I was never quite like the greedy Esau, I must admit, however, to feeling a little bit like the ignorant Esau. You see for most of my childhood, I believed that “guile” was a kind of stew, maybe from Texas, from where my mother had come. Maybe if I had been more studious, like Jacob, who spent his childhood studying in the family tents, I would have known that “guile” was an action, not a recipe.

It was then, Jacob’s guile, that won him the cherished birthright. Yes, he tricked his brother out of it, or at least took advantage of him in a weak, ignorant, and greedy moment, and came away with a double portion of the family’s wealth, as well as the title of “head” of the family. Perhaps we should have no sympathy for Esau. It doesn’t seem like those who remembered his story had much sympathy for him; his portrayal is less one of innocent victim of Jacob’s guile than his own carelessness or hubris. But the fact remains that Jacob did trick him or take advantage of him, setting in motion what was predicted while the twins were still

in the womb, that they would be two nations struggling with one another, for it was this event that began the conflict between the nations of Israel and Edom, about which we read so much in the Old Testament. There is something ironic in Jacob's guile, however, as he was a studious man, the Rabbis of the Jewish tradition even suggesting that he passed his time in the family tents studying scripture, as well as being "quiet," as the text says. Some of the Rabbis even suggest that it was for the reason of his superior spiritual life that God preferred him as the brother that would carry the promise given to Abraham and Isaac. But no matter how great his knowledge of God's wisdom may have been, it netted him nothing but enmity, and what is ironic is that if we are to believe God's revelation to Rebekah, he never would have had to do anything in order to receive God's preferential treatment, since he already had it in the womb. All he had to do was wait.

It may be that Jacob's guile was what we sometimes call a self-fulfilling prophecy, a prediction that is certain to come true because we do everything in our power to make it come true. Perhaps in those long hours in the tent, his beloved mother Rebekah had reminded him in not so subtle ways that he was the chosen one, telling him again and again how God came to her in the prayers of her anguish to reveal the nature of the relationship between those struggling within her even before birth. And so, filled with the knowledge of his chosen-ness, he may even have calculated the ways in which he would make sure it would come to pass, at least in the economic and political spheres of the family. First he would secure the

birthright, and then, when the time was right, his father's blessing, as we will read in upcoming chapters. By his own doing, he would make good on God's promise, as if God wasn't capable of taking care of that little detail. It may be that Jacob was no more deserving than the greedy and ignorant Esau to be our spiritual ancestor, since he tried to take by works what was already his by grace. Perhaps God's grace is best seen in that God did not pull the plug on the Jacob who could not wait for the promise to be kept, but instead needed to pull a fast one on his brother.

The truth is that neither of the brothers was worthy of what God could have bestowed on either one. Esau so despised the birthright that he sold it for nothing, and Jacob coveted it so much that he resorted to trickery to obtain it. True, the birthright was something that could be sold, but Jacob's real birthright, the promise that it would be his descendants who carried the promise, never belonged to Esau in the first place. Esau may have been blind to the value of his birthright, but so too was Jacob to his own. Remarkably and thankfully, God doesn't only work through perfect people with great spiritual insight, but also through flawed people who sometimes live with fog in their spiritual vistas. Even Jacob's guile could not overcome God's grace.

I want to be clear, however, that God's grace in this story is not the economic blessing of Jacob, nor that he takes precedence over his brother, for neither of these was a prerequisite for God's promise to Abraham to be fulfilled. Rather, the grace was Jacob's chosen-ness for the job of patriarch, for being

remembered whenever the people remembered their God, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” as we hear echoing through the centuries of the Biblical story. It should also be made clear that God’s grace in this story is God’s mercy to Esau, who may have deserved to be cast adrift for being such a fool, but whom God blessed as the father of his own nation, even if it that nation would be a bitter enemy of Israel. In fact, throughout these early stories of God’s people, God is particularly merciful on those who may have deserved something less than mercy, or who end up in second place, when they thought they should have been the winners. Consider Cain, who probably deserved a worse fate for killing his brother, because he thought he deserved better because he was the first born of Adam and Eve. But God spared him anyway. Consider Abraham’s son, Ishmael, another firstborn, who might have expected the fruits of that position. But he too was another firstborn rejected, even if the consolation prize was being the father of another nation. And at the very end of Jacob’s life, we will read again how God chose not the firstborn to carry the blessing, but the younger, when the same Jacob of tonight’s story blesses his grandson Ephraim over his older brother Manasseh. Manasseh remained the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, but the path to God’s salvation passed not through him, but through Ephraim.

As the firstborn in my family, I have always been intrigued by the rejection of the firstborns. I’m just waiting for it to happen to me too, I guess. When is it all going to come crashing down? But then I remember the curious fact of God’s

grace that it is not being firstborn which guarantees me any kind of blessing. You see, the idea of the firstborn receiving special benefits, or a double portion, or bragging rights, is not God's idea, but any given society's idea. Nowhere in Scripture, and least of all not way back in the beginning of Genesis, is there anything to suggest that firstborns are any more special in God's eyes than those who follow after them. Rather it has been society's need for order and structure that has fostered the traditions behind birth order. It is true, of course, that firstborns are the greatest blessing, wink, wink, but if they deserve any special notoriety, it is only because they prove that children are possible in any given relationship, a fact of survival in Isaac and Rebekah's day. But as these early stories in Genesis prove, the importance of a firstborn is only that, and nothing more, since it is the younger who supplants the elder, and that is good news.

Why is this good news? Why is it Gospel? Well, it is good news because it means that our God is not interested in playing by the rules we set, but in setting the rules we must follow. And that is good news because we human beings are not very good at setting up rules that are good news for second-borns, or third-borns, or poverty-borns, or disabled-borns, or homely-borns, or different-borns, no matter what that difference may be. If it were left up to human invention, we would bless the "wise and intelligent," rather than the infants, as we heard in last week's reading from Matthew. We would pay the workers who worked all day more than those who worked only the last hour of the day. We would keep the five fish and

two loaves for ourselves and send everyone else home hungry. We would pull down Jesus, still alive, from the cross and start a revolution in Jerusalem. We would make sure that everybody played by the same rules in the church, and force those from the other side of the fence to conform to our standards and our ways of being God's people. But God is not interested in all that ignorance and greed, that thinking that some are more special than others, that some are more deserving than others. No, God is interested in grace, a grace which applies equally to all, not because we are all deserving, but simply because God's love and mercy are bigger than our unworthiness, greater than our ignorance and greed, greater than our desires to take by works what is already ours by grace. Remember that even though Jacob received the blessing, he was not worthy of it, and that even though Esau was not worthy of God's grace, he still received it. God is funny like that. That's good news to me. I hope it is to you too. Amen.