

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Proper 10 Year A  
July 16, 2017

We meet Esau today in our genealogical narrative of the family which represents the birth of the nation of Israel. We may have given Esau very little conscious thought in the past, for although he is the first-born and favored son of his father Isaac, he is discredited by the narrator for his apparent rash and short-sighted action of selling his birthright for a cup of lentil soup.

From the very start, with the description of his appearance at birth, we know Esau is unconventional, being covered with furry red hair everywhere, in a culture and ethnicity where the predominant skin and hair color was much darker. He's ruddy in complexion, in contrast to the smooth olive tone of his twin brother's skin. As he grows into a young man, I imagine him to be strong and muscular, which in some ways makes him a bit clumsy when maneuvering around the tents of the village, being in that awkward stage when he hasn't quite grown into the height of his body. Crouching around the fire as the family gathers to eat was as problematic as he found small-talk to be.

Yet to see him out in the woods, his body suddenly lengthening to fill his tall lean frame, his muscular arms precisely and almost tenderly aiming his bow to gather the game for the family's dinner, we catch a difference glimpse of this unconventional character in our story. He speaks a language known only to him out there in the woods. From the rhythms of nature, he's learned the vocabulary of balance, gratitude, and respect. His craving for solitude is his greatest need, for when he alone steps deeper into the forest, responding to a calling deep within himself, he is nourished by an awareness of something or someone larger than himself, larger than his family's squabbles, even larger than what others speak of the covenant with YHWH, the Hebrew word we translate as "God". He doesn't entirely discredit YHWH or the daily rhythm of prayer his family offers, he has just stumbled upon a larger expression of YHWH to which he bonds.

Was Esau really just famished the day he traded his birthright for a cup of lentil soup? Or was the interchange between Esau and Jacob one which started out as playful, a tease between brothers, but which suddenly turned serious? Was Esau, having a different language at his command, unable to comprehend the subtleties of and adroitly maneuver his way around the bargain Jacob had formulated? Or was something else going on?

As background to this alternative, I'd like to offer you as the reasoning behind Esau's relinquishing his birthright, which he is described as "despising", yet craving the blessing designed for him on Isaac's death bed, it's important to know something of the meaning of birthright and blessing in that culture.

A birthright was the status bestowed upon the successor of the head of the household. It provided for special economic and family responsibilities and most importantly privileges. This meant more money, more land, more livestock, more privilege. The firstborn was given this birthright automatically, but it could be bartered or stripped away.

When I imagine Esau's response to Jacob's demand to relinquish his birthright, and take it further than the excuse of the gnawing hunger in his belly, I wonder if Esau, having been so shaped by the earth, having felt a connection to the ground beneath him and the sky above him, having been aware of the deep beauty of the meadows he meandered through or the forests he silently explored, all of which had taught him the language of gratitude, respect, and balance, that when he despised his birthright, he was operating out of place that we would now call "spiritual but not religious". Could he have "despised" his birthright because he knew the system was unjust? What would be in balance in the world if he received 2/3 of the inheritance, and Jacob, who was born just moments later, received a scant 1/3? How would he respect his family members, if he suddenly had authority over them all, ordering them around, determining their actions, whom they could marry, whom they couldn't? Where was gratitude to show up in a system that perpetuated favoritism? Could it be his walk with YHWH in the woods caused him to loathe his birthright because it was against all that he held to be true? It is certainly, a possibility, I would think. Perhaps Esau understood what Jesus later made very clear in the Sermon on the Mount, that the Kingdom of God coming near means the inversion of a system created to favor power and wealth. Perhaps Esau despised his birthright because it didn't ring true to what he knew to be true of the creator of all.

If Esau despised and forfeited his birthright because it was an unjust system, why then does he eagerly anticipate and excitedly prepare to receive his father's blessing? Weren't they one in the same? So, let's step back in that culture again. Traditionally the blessing was offered by the father to the son who owned the birthright and was similar to one's Last Will and Testament, offering title and possessions to one's heirs, usually the eldest son. In this particular family's situation, the blessing was something more special - less about possessions and role, and more about passing on the inherited covenantal blessing between God and Abraham, in which God promised land, children, and prosperity; in other words, a future, and a relationship with God. The one who received Isaac's blessing received YHWH's blessing, as no one else would. This is what Esau wants, YHWH's blessing, probably not to the exclusion of others, but neither did he want to be excluded from the lineage of God's people.

Today's lectionary doesn't include the part of the story where Esau clamors for Isaac's blessing, but hopefully you remember the story, because we can't understand the birthright scenario without coupling it with the blessing fiasco. The most remarkable line in the story, and the one which seems so human and real, is when Esau realizes his father has been tricked into giving his one and only blessing away to Jacob, and he cries, as any brother might, "Me too! Father! Give me one too!". But Isaac can't. As much as he regrets it, he had only one to give away. Esau leaves, disheartened and bereft, and turns his anger toward Jacob, for deceit is wrong, and Jacob stole something from Esau that mattered to him: the chance to receive the blessing of God.

The blessing of YHWH or God, in Esau's lifetime, meant crops abundant, land as far as your eye could see, children as numerous as the stars, in other words, a prosperous future. It also meant power, for the blessing included the implication that nations would bow down to you, and those who blessed you (looked up to you, admired you) would be blessed, and those who cursed you (hated, deceived, plotted against you) would be cursed themselves. I don't think any of that mattered to Esau, (though I do think it meant the world to Jacob,) but a blessing to Esau meant a connection to something larger than himself, the presence of YHWH, which up until now, he had found only in the woods. Here was his chance to bring that which he experienced in the woods into his family life: balance, respect, and gratitude. He wanted an integrated life for himself and his family, and he was denied that opportunity. He wanted to bring within the organized system, the familial and religious structure, his spirituality or understanding of the holy. Thwarted, he turned away bitter, and he and Jacob fulfilled the oracle offered to Rebekah by God during her pregnancy, that her sons would lead nations divided and in conflict.

Of course, Esau wanted YHWH's blessing, as I would say, of course, we all desire God's blessing. Although, once again it is helpful to understand the distinction of meaning of blessing in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, so that when we speak of desiring and receiving God's blessing, we're clear what we mean from the Christian perspective.

The Hebrew Bible presents YHWH's blessing as a possession that can be given by one to another, passed along to one's favored son, and as we see from this story, a contentious point of division among family members, a symbol of a system which revolves around the notion that there is a finite amount of grace, given only to the favored ones. The Christian Bible presents God's blessing as something offered by God to all of God's people. I raise the body and blood of Christ, and say, "The gifts of God for you, the people of God". Our understanding is that the gifts are for each one of you.

The Hebrew Bible presents YHWH's blessing as prosperity (children, wealth, land); the Christian Bible does not, but rather an inversion of a system that promotes an unequitable distribution of wealth. "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the ones who live in poverty, for they will be open to receive". We as Episcopalians are not adherents to the "prosperity gospel" which promotes the idea that if we are faithful, God will reward us with material wealth.

YHWH's blessing in the Hebrew Bible meant children. Blessing in the Christian Bible means not necessarily birth of our own children, but rather adoption by God, as God's own beloved, and a joining into the spiritual family offered to us through baptism in Christ.

YHWH's blessing meant a future; God's blessing in the Christian Bible means an awareness of God's presence, here and now, a life in the Spirit as Paul writes about, of being the fertile soil in our parable, ready to set deep roots into the mystery of God.

These comparisons are not to say that the ancient Israelites had it all wrong. Rather, for Christians, Jesus changed everything. It is not that we own God's blessing now instead of the

Israelites or the Jews, or that it is ours to give away or not, or to use to divide families or nations, as happened in the story of Jacob and Esau. But, rather God's blessing, our yearning for it and God's freely offering it to us, is a part of us, due to the incarnation of God through the person of Jesus. We are hard-wired to want it, and the God I believe in is hard-wired to offer it, unconditionally, to all. I believe that we, like Esau, long to be loved, desire to be connected to our creation and to one another, and that desire is inherently connected to our hunger for the source of all love, which is God, from which we cannot be separated. I believe that we, like Esau, have a hunger to be made whole, an aching to be fed with something that lasts, a burning to be true, a craving to love, a yearning for our emptiness to be filled, because our souls are wounded and there's brokenness in our lives, because there's tragedy in the world, because those whom we love are in pain, because we want to be set free, because we have a glimpse of something out there that we only see as potential, but which God sees as a reality. I believe that we, like Esau, are filled with questions, wanting to integrate those questions with our lives, desiring to join our spiritual experience of God with our family and religious organizations, and that we, like Esau, are sometimes more at peace out in the margins, where we can "be the questions" rather than hear answers to our questions that fit within the constraints of our religion.

I don't know if you believe me that, at our core, we all desire God's blessing and it is freely given to us, regardless of the state of our soul or life. I don't know if you want to believe me because if you do, it means that if our acknowledged primary relationship is not with God, if God is not a source of felt love, burning in your heart, your world is smaller than it could be. And your world may work just fine for you right now. You may not want to break it open. You may not want it disrupted by a radical way of loving. I know I lived a good portion of my life in such a place as Richard Rohr, a contemporary theologian, speaks of building the container of our lives, filling it with possessions and accomplishments, only to realize that, at some point in life, our Christian work is to empty that container and prepare room for that which alone can meet our deepest needs: the living presence of God.

What makes this reality truth for me, that we are hard-wired to crave God's blessing and God is hard-wired to give it, is our shared experience at the end of each worship service, when I offer you God's blessing. It is so clear to me that in that moment, when I lean forward onto the altar, that I peer into your souls with the eyes of God's heart, and with love from my own heart, and I see the need for blessing deep within you that God does, and I marvel that in those few words I utter, "the blessing of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you always" with the intention of drawing God's presence near and within each one of us, I know we each are blessed by God. I know that we will each go out from the service, some of us scattering until we meet again next Sunday or next month, some of us coming together in prayer, service, or learning throughout the week, but I know we have been united in a way that does pass all understanding, we have been united as recipients of God's abounding grace, and we have been blessed, and deep within us, that blessing has met our deepest need. It is one of the truest moments of my week, when I know I am most aligned to God's desires. We never have to say, as Esau did, "Me too! Give me a blessing too" for we have been given that blessing,

not to own, not to hold back from others, but to allow to seep deep within our soul, and touch our deepest need and to be healed.

I once attended services at another Episcopal Church where our former bishop, Nathan Baxter was the presider, and due to his Baptist background, brought a different genre of music into the mix of this more informal worship. Although it was terribly “un-Episcopalian”, we ended the service, in the intimacy of the chapel, by holding hands, swaying together and singing the song, “God be with you until we meet again.” The choice of song was brilliant for it took God’s blessing we had each received in the Eucharist and united us into a different kind of Holy Communion, one where we articulated our desire for that blessing to be upon each one of us as we headed out into the world. We can neither own God’s blessing nor deny it for anyone else, but we can share it, and make it real for others. God’s blessing be with you, until we meet again.  
Amen.