

A Prodigal Blessing

Genesis 27:38-40, Genesis 28:10-19a

September 27, 2020

La Verne Church of the Brethren

A couple years ago, my son, Matt, invested in the Bibliotheaca Bible. It is the Bible, separated into five books, but without chapters, verses, footnotes or subject headings. The idea is that you get to read the Bible like you would most any other book. The Bibliotheaca Bible advertises itself as “a pure, literary experience” of the Bible’s vast and varied contents. I was overjoyed to hear my son was reading the Bible and I wanted to hear if the Bible in this format changed the experience for him.

Matt told me that he felt freer reading the Bible this way. He didn’t feel pushed in any direction and because it was more like reading other books he was more inclined to read it through. He said, “The way our Bibles are constructed makes the whole process of reading them feel geometric — like we are reading a proof.” He said reading the Bible without footnotes, chapters, subject headings and verses allowed the gift of poetry to come through. The way most of us read the Bible is so disjointed. We pull out a story here and a quote from Paul there without paying attention to its literary context.

I thought of that as I was preparing for this worship service. One of the things that consistently amazes me is that I see new things in the Bible all the time depending on what is happening in my life; what is on the news; or how I read the Bible. Today we heard two different scriptures that tell parts of the life of Jacob. We know these stories of Jacob’s life but we usually hear them pulled apart from each other for the convenience of a Sunday morning worship service timeframe.

The first scripture that was read needs some context. Jacob and Esau were twins born to Rebekah and Isaac after years of infertility. Esau was the oldest child and his brother Jacob, whose name means supplanter, was born hanging onto the heel of his older brother. This story of their birth gives us a clue into the future relationship of these twin brothers.

Esau grew up to be a man’s man, always out hunting. Jacob stayed home and baked cookies, totally enmeshed with his mother. Rebekah was a mother with a favorite child and she wanted for youngest child all the things that an oldest son was afforded in her culture. So mother and youngest son connived to steal Esau’s birthright and blessing. First, Jacob gets Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew but the theft of the blessing required more trickery.

When Issac is old and blind and bedridden he decides he better get busy and bestow the blessing on Esau while he was still able to do so. He calls Esau to him and tells him to go hunting, come back with his game and make his father a savory stew. Issac says, “Then come to me and I will give you my blessing.” Rebekah overhears this conversation and as soon as Esau is out the backdoor she whispers to Jacob, “Let’s get a move

on." Rebekah dresses up Jacob in Esau's clothes and puts the skin of goats on his arms and the smooth part of his neck so that when Isaac touches him he will think Jacob is actually his hairier brother. Then Rebekah sends Jacob into his father with a delicious stew in his hands. Jacob, a wolf in goat's clothing, goes into his father's bedroom and steals his brother's blessing right out from under the blind eyes of his father.

In the first scripture that Jonah read today we experience Esau's reaction when he discovers that his mother and his twin brother were in cahoots to take what was his. He is devastated beyond words. He begs his father to bless him also but his father claims he gave all his blessing away with his words to Jacob. Esau's words ring in our ears: "*But don't you have just one blessing for me, Father? Oh, bless me my father! Bless me!*" *Esau sobbed inconsolably.*

The second scripture Jonah read to us today picks up after Jacob runs for his life because his furious brother is planning to murder him. Jacob's parents, afraid of what is about to happen to their youngest son tell him to run for his life. They suggest he go to his kinsman Laban's house. "And while you are there, why don't you look for a good Canaanite woman to marry?" they suggest.

Jacob takes off in a run and doesn't stop until after the sun sets. When he can't go another step he falls down onto the ground and pulls up a rock for a pillow. In his exhaustion he goes immediately to sleep and dreams of a stairway to heaven. In his dreams angels are climbing up and down between the spot where he is sleeping and the very gate of heaven. If that weren't amazing enough he dreams that God comes and stands right beside him. God doesn't chastise Jacob. God doesn't tell him to return to his home and apologize to his brother. No. God promises that Jacob will have so many offspring they will be like the dust of the earth. God says he will bless all the families of the earth through Jacob. God even adds a P.S.: "I am with you and I won't leave you."

All my life I have been so conflicted by this story. As a youngest child there is part of me that has always secretly liked that God seems to choose Jacob over the oldest, designated-for-blessing child. But at my core, I am a rule follower who believes in the goodness of family and I am aghast at how Jacob and his mother, two con-artists cut out of the same cloth, treated their very own family. It doesn't help that when Jacob met his uncle Laban he found another family member who had no trouble cheating his own kin. What a family!

But all these years of a geometrical reading of the Bible has taken its toll and I have come to the conclusion that I missed something very important. I have read this story all my life as the story of Jacob. But by doing that I missed main character....God. I didn't see this story within its larger literary context.

Jacob, a wretch...a self-indulgent child....a prodigal on the run, dreams of a stairway that leads to heaven's gates but before Jacob can even climb those stairs, God comes to him. God doesn't give Jacob what he deserves...a lecture and time out to think about his sins. God blesses him and promises to bless his children and his children's

children and his children's children's children and all the families of the earth through Jacob....a dirty, rotten scoundrel. God is so unlike Jacob's father, Isaac who declared he only had one limited blessing to bestow. God's blessings appear to be infinite like the dust of the earth. It looks like God throws around blessings recklessly in every direction.

When Jacob wakes up from this incredible dream, he is still Jacob. He is still conniving and making deals. He declares, "If you are true to your promise and stay with me, protect me, keep me in food and clothing and return me safely to my father's house in one piece then you can be my God." Jacob thinks he can make a deal, even with God. Jacob treats this like he is making a buying a car...."throw in the undercoating and I'm in."

Jacob makes the same mistake I did. He thinks this is his story but it is larger than Jacob. This is a story about God's love and God's grace.... things you can't earn...only receive. God doesn't love us because of who we are.....but because of who God is. What better way to make that clear than to bestow blessing and grace on this narcissistic deceiver and then all of us through him. I feel like we just need to keep hearing this truth. There aren't limited blessings we have to win by deceit or birth order or our own purity or goodness. God is lavish with grace and extravagant with love.

As Frederick Buechner says in his book Wishful Thinking:

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth...A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do.

Just breathe that in for a second. Nothing, absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God through Christ Jesus. Nothing. While it is the best news ever it is also scandalous news. That lavish grace that God offers to you, is also bestowed on that scoundrel down the street that makes you crazy. And if that isn't enough, God loves the people you think are misled...even the ones you know are downright evil. Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her latest book Shameless writes: *My Christian faith tells me that good news is only good if it is for everyone, otherwise it's just ideology.* She says that makes the Gospel the worst good news she has ever heard in her life.

Friends, God loves Jacob as much as God loves Esau. This truth about God is outrageous and the Bible is filled to overflowing with this message. Try reading the Bible stories all the way through with this truth in mind and you will see it everywhere...from the man in the ditch to the Levite that crossed on the other side of the road to avoid getting involved....from Jonah to the Ninevites....from the workers in the vineyard who worked all day and the ones who only worked one hour. From the prodigal son to his older brother. It seems nonsensical to say but there is enough love and grace to go around. The God of Jacob and Esau loves us all and lavishes us with blessings. There is enough blessing for all of us prodigals. Amen.