

“Sale of a Birthright”

Our second scripture comes from the book of Genesis 25:19-34. Over the next couple of weeks, we will be embarking on a short journey through the book of Genesis, as we follow the story of the brothers of Jacob and Esau. Listen now for a word from God:

¹⁹ These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife because she was barren, and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² 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. ²³ 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.”

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel, so he was named Jacob.^[d] Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.^[e]) ³¹ Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” ³² Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” ³³ Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So, he swore to him and

sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus, Esau despised his birthright.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This past spring I had the opportunity to tour the campus of Davidson College with my predecessor in this role Julia Watkins. Julia and I were leading a retreat for a cohort of early career pastors and seminarians, and one of our educational opportunities, was to meet with students and to hear about the work Davidson is doing in their Spiritual Life Department. We were led by one of the Associate Chaplains at Davidson, the Rev. Daniel Heath, who was telling us about his work as the Director of Descendent Communities engagement at Davidson College. In addition to his work as a chaplain, Daniel's role is to build relationships with the people and communities descended from those who were enslaved and exploited by Davidson college throughout its history. Many of the families of these enslaved people (including his own) Daniel told us, have remained in the neighborhoods in and around Davidson for generations, and they are working to tell their stories, not as subjects of history, but as partners in their ongoing work of restoration.

As part of the tour, we visited the site of the newly dedicated "With These Hands" memorial, located in the oldest part of Davidson's campus. The statue depicts a pair of outstretched hands, representing the hands of the people who were exploited or enslaved by the college in its history, who contributed to making the college what it is today. The Memorial stands outside of Oak Hall, one of the campus's oldest buildings where the bricks were literally made by hand. You can place your fingers in the indents of the bricks made by the fingerprints of the enslaved people who made the bricks hundreds of years ago. The memorial is one of Davidson's first steps to understand their own history, to reckon with its legacies of its exploitation, and to repair the harm that was done.

One of the most important questions our faith prods us to ask, is "how do we reconcile with those whom we have harmed by our actions." It is a challenging task. It's much easier to imagine ourselves as the ones who need to offer forgiveness, rather than receive it. It's much harder to confront the ones who have wronged us, than the ones we have wronged.

And yet, if we believe that God is truly about the work of forgiveness, how do we humbly ask for forgiveness from those we have wronged. If we believe that God is about the work of reconciliation, how do we make room for the Spirit to reconcile those who have been divided. If we believe that God is bringing people together, uniting them in Jesus Christ, how does our faith embody that unity in visible ways? These are the questions that today asks.

The story of Jacob and Esau is one that is fraught with conflict from the very beginning and will continue throughout their relationship together. Today's text is the first in three episodes about Jacob and Esau in which Jacob tricks Esau into selling his birthright, deceives his father into giving him Esau's blessing, and flees from his home, for fear that his brother might kill him. In each episode, the conflict between them grows, and darkens, until Jacob feels he has no choice, but to flee to a foreign land. These brothers are no strangers to causing one another harm, and there is no shortage of bad blood between them.

The story begins with the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, who for twenty years pray for a child until finally, God answers their prayers. And yet this long-awaited pregnancy is not all that they hoped it to be. The narrator tells us that the twins struggle together in Rebekah's womb. The Hebrew literally translated means they are trying "crush, struggle one another." Even in the womb, these two brothers seem destined for hatred, conflict, and struggle against one another. So much so, that Rebekah begins to ask God, "why do I live?" And God responds:

"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."

It's not exactly the words of comfort I imagine Rebekah was hoping for in that moment. And yet, it helps us to understand that this story is about more than the complexity of family dynamics or the challenges of sibling relationships; it is telling the story of something bigger. This text is a cultural and historical mythology, told to explain the national conflicts of the time. Each of the two brothers represent a nation: Jacob representing Israel, and Esau, the neighboring nation of Edom. These two nations were engaged in a generations long conflict; they despised one another. The prophet Obadiah describes how Edom stood by as the Babylonian empire invaded Jerusalem. Edom rejoiced in the destruction and exile of the people. They boasted, and gloated, and even participated in plundering the city. The conflict between Israel and Edom was so long, marked by betrayal after betrayal, that people began to wonder where it even began. And so, the story of Jacob and Esau is born.

"We are descended from Jacob," the story says, "and they are descended from Esau." Jacob is the younger brother, the quieter, softer brother, who lived in tents. Esau is the older brother, the more rugged brother, who hunted and lived in the field. Esau was hairy, and Jacob was smooth. Jacob was Rebekah's favorite. And Esau was Isaac's favorite. They were so different they even wrestled in the womb, and one came out gripping the other's heel. They were destined to be at odds.

But while stories like these might help us understand the origins of our deep seeded resentments, they pose a danger as well. They have the potential to bolster our biases, reinforce our fear, and keep us divided. If at best we imagine that our conflicts as unsolvable, and at worst, ordained by God, we miss the opportunity for forgiveness, reconciliation, and for renewed and transformed relationship. We miss what God is doing through the other.

The story of Jacob and Esau holds up a mirror to those conflicts that we think are too hard, too long, too deeply seeded to resolve, and says what are we going to do about it? Will we let the relationship devolve into bitterness. Will we run away for fear of facing the past. Or will we work toward restored relationship? Will we do the hard, difficult work of reconciliation. Will we ask to be forgiven? At the heart of the story is the reminder that ultimately Jacob and Esau are brothers. They are not strangers that can simply cast aside their differences, because they do not know one another. They are not enemies that can keep one another at a distance. They are brothers. The story asks the question, "how will you treat your brother whom you have wronged?"

When I was in college, I was on a planning team for the Montreat College Conference. Our Keynote Speaker for the conference was Valerie Kaur, who is a Sikh American activist, author, filmmaker and speaker, who is working toward a world that embodies, what she calls "Revolutionary Love." She told the story of how in the aftermath of 9/11 a series of violent hate crimes, were committed toward Sikh and Muslim Americans. One of the first people murdered in those hate crimes was her family friend whom she called uncle, Balbir Sing Sodhi. He was murdered standing out in front of his family business, a gas station in Arizona.

15 years after Balbir's murder, having just given birth to her son, and feeling like the world he would grow up in would be no better than the one she did, she returned to that gas station in Arizona. lit a candle in the place where he died, and wept with Balbir's brother, Rana. Rana said to her, "nothing has changed." And she responded, "then who have we not yet tried to love?"

Together Valerie and Rana called Balbir's murderer in prison, Frank Roque. And they asked why Frank had agreed to speak with them. He said, "I'm sorry for what happened, but I'm also sorry for all the people who died in 9/11."

Valerie described how angry she felt in that moment that he refused to take accountability, but how Rana continued to be curious. "Frank, this is the first time I'm hear you say you feel sorry."

He said, "yes, I am sorry for what I did to your brother. One day when I go to heaven to be judged by God, I will ask to see your brother, and I will hug him, and I will ask for forgiveness."

Rana said, "we already forgave you."

There is power in forgiveness, because it means that we are not bound by what has happened in the past. Not that we must forget the past, but that it does not have to define what happens next.

Friends, we are indeed brothers and sisters, siblings in Jesus Christ our Lord. All of us part of one human family. So, the question we must ask, is with whom do we need to reconcile. Who must we ask forgiveness, and "Who have we not yet tried to love?"