

Genesis 25:19-34

25:19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,
25:20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

25:21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

25:22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" (*Said every pregnant woman sometime*) So she went to inquire of the LORD.

25:23 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."

25:24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.

25:25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.

25:26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she [Rebekah] bore them.

25:27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.

25:28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

25:29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished.

25:30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.)

25:31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."

25:32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

25:33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

25:34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Romans 3:21-26

Righteousness through Faith

²¹ But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^[d] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement^[e] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.^[f]

Proclamation of the Word

Most stories have one- a fool. You know the one who plays the role of comic relief to show us something true. Shakespeare gave us Bottom and Puck in "A Midsummer's Night Dream" and Disney gave us Dory in the movie, *Finding Nemo*- that blustering, forgetful, sweet Blue Tang fish. It is usually the fool's job in any story to be the conscience and to help us see things as they really are. The fool's humor allows him to speak truth.

As Oscar Wilde said, **"If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you."**

Biblical Truth comes to us in the humorous story of Jacob and Esau and the selling of the birthright. Humorous? What? the Bible is funny? Humor is lost on us contemporary hearers. But we can all see that Esau is the big buffoon, the fool in this encounter.

Esau- duped by his younger, wimpier brother sells his birthright, his inheritance, for a bowl of lentil soup! Some liken Esau to the character Hoss in the old TV show *Bonanza*, good-hearted and sweet, but a little slow. Another more recent TV character, might be Joey from *Friends*- sweet, but slow. Or think, Will Ferrell's character, Buddy the Elf in the favorite Christmas movie by the same name, *Elf*. In fact, think any Will Ferrell character or Chevy Chase character. Good-hearted, sweet, but slow. You get the picture.

Esau- the name means "Red"- like the soup and like his descendents after him, the Edomites. (*Hebrew*) So "Big Red" got taken. He's the big guy, the older brother- Dad's favorite son. The sibling rivalry

started in the womb when the boys were wrestling. Jacob was a cheater from the start- a shrewd, savvy trickster. What he lacked in brawn, he made up for in brains. Jacob was his mother, Rebekah's favorite.

Jacob's people, the Israelites would have heard this story and cheered the scoundrel Jacob. What is lost to us is that Esau's people, the Edomites, were always on top. They were the enemy neighbors. The big bad Edomites always were on top. Putting ourselves in the shoes of Jacob's people, we would be pulling for Jacob, the underdog, of course. After all, society said that Esau should get the biggest and best slice of pie, just by the fact that he was the twin who was born first. In fact, Esau was entitled to 2/3 of the pie, not just a slice. Second born sons according to Walter Brueggemann are down there with the widows, orphans, and immigrants. They are the ones the Scripture instructs us to protect because they have little in terms of rights, status, or means.

And we are cheering

- like when we watched Rocky Balboa wins against the gargantuan Soviet boxer Drago in the boxing ring in *Rocky IV*.ⁱ
- or when we cry and cheer on the underdog football team who wins in *Remember the Titans* . There is justice and redemption.ⁱⁱ
- Or when Erin Brokovich, an unemployed single mother turned legal assistant, single-handedly takes down a power company known to have contaminated the local town's water causing people to develop cancer. And wrongs are made right.ⁱⁱⁱ

God will not be bound by society's standards here. God picks the underdog, the younger. Jacob will be the chosen son. This is encouraging to second, third- born children everywhere! And we babies are especially glad.

While the world keeps their eyes trained toward the privileged, the powerful people and institutions, by God keeps an eye on the vulnerable and poor. God will bless and keep Esau, too, but God generally works through the lowly and the left out.

God has a thing for underdogs.

- Jacob's son Joseph, the youngest, gets sold into slavery by his brothers. They will bow to him in the end, looking like the fools.
- The descendants of Joseph, will become the Hebrew slave people. God will raise up Moses to lead them out of Egypt- making fools of the powerful Egyptians.
- Jesse's youngest son, David, is the one who goes up against the giant Goliath, and wins with one great shot. (he didn't throw away his shot!) It was young David that was chosen as king.
- And then Jesus will speak of the privileged/the "Blessed" as the poor, those who mourn, and the like- not the rich, powerful, and famous. The underdogs will inherit the kingdom of God.

- Jesus chose to hang out with "publicans, prostitutes, and sinners"

Big bad Red--Esau, got put into his place by Jacob. The hearers around the campfire would be saying, "Yea- get him Jacob. You go, Jacob."

But isn't Jacob stealing something that does not belong to him? Isn't Jacob, the Heel, grabbing for something that is not his? He cheats the system and his sweet, but slow brother- a birthright for a bowl of soup. Jacob pales in comparison to his faithful grandfather, Abraham or his successful father, Isaac. Jacob is a rascal and a scoundrel.

Yes. And God chooses this scoundrel Jacob to build his covenant family upon. It goes against our sense of right and wrong and smells of scandal for sure. The undeserving, crafty Jacob will come out on top.

It's scandalous. God will not be deterred in working out God's purposes as promised. And frankly, God is free to choose how God will do it. I think our little window into the family drama here is a real reminder that God is God and we are not. We throw around the words "Sovereignty of God" assuming we understand it. Here, God is free to choose how God will do things. As my Professor Shirley Guthrie would say, "Sovereignty of God means God can do what God darn well pleases." We do not control God even when our sense of right get in the way. **Because God's will is not dependent on the goodness of Jacob, but on the gracious will of God.** As in our reading from the book of Romans, Paul declares so truthfully, "all sin and fall short of the glory of God." By God's grace we are saved...we have faith....by God's grace.

That's right, Grace is scandalous. Getting something we do not and cannot deserve.

And God's grace works in real life issues like family conflict, messy people.

For heaven's sake the Bible does not even hide the fact that Isaac loved Esau more and Rebekah loved Jacob. Parents are not supposed to have favorites, right?

Families are messy and relationships can be challenging. People are messy. Churches are messy, and Lord knows, our society is messy. God works even through that. But what God wills is not always what we want or even think is fair. That is the sovereignty of God at work. Yes, the sovereignty of God extends to the whole of creation, not just the hearts of Christians or the Church. God is sovereign over public life, nations, and the whole world. And God gets to choose.

So where is the good news in that?

God chose a fool like Esau and a scoundrel like Jacob through which to work God's purposes out.
God chooses to work through fallible and broken people all the time.
God can even work through you and me.

God chooses what is despised and foolish. According to 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 (NRSV)

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one^[a] might boast in the presence of God.

God chooses the foolish, weak, low and despised...so that no one might boast. So that...God gets the credit and God gets the glory. God wants us to know our place. We are beloved, yes...created a little lower than angels, yes, but we are still human beings and God is God. As we sang a few weeks ago,

*This is my Father's world:
Oh, let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world,
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and Heav'n be one.
God will work God's purposes out.^{iv}*

God even chooses the scandal of a cross, and Jesus crucified to shame the wise, to show us the sacrificial, suffering love of God. So the God who gets to do as God pleases, does everything for God's loving purposes and will. That is who God is.

God's big, big plan is so much larger than what we can wrap our minds around. It is long term plan that goes beyond this generation, but has been at work since The Big Promise is made to Abraham and Sarah that their descendents would be as many as the stars in the sky- a blessing to all peoples and nations.

Frederick Beuchner writes, "Luckily for Jacob, (AND US!) God doesn't love people because of who they are, but because of who [God] is. *It's on the house* is one way of saying it and *it's by grace* is another, just as it was by grace that it was Jacob of all people who became not only the father of the twelve tribes of Israel but the many times great grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth, and just as it was by grace that Jesus of Nazareth was born into this world at all." ^v

This Jesus calls stinky fisherman, women, and a tax collector of all people to be in his inner circle, his first friends and disciples. Those friends' lives were up-ended, transformed, and changed forever by the gracious love of Jesus who called them to serve God's purposes in the world.

You are called to those same gracious purposes- no matter your history, your lineage, your bank account, or day job. God calls all sorts of fools and scoundrels, imperfect people to come and follow Jesus- to be a blessing, to receive blessing- to serve God's loving and gracious purposes. In the coming weeks, we will spend time with Jacob and see how God transforms and redeems his life.

It has and always will be through broken and sinful people that the grace of God becomes most visible and clear.

In this we can boast,
God's promises are true.
God's grace is amazing.

ⁱ Sylvester Stallone, *Rocky IV*, 1985, United States: United Artists.

ⁱⁱ Boaz Yakin and Gregory Allen Howard, *Remember the Titans*, 2000, United States: Jerry Bruckheimer Films.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen Soderburgh and Susannah Grant, *Erin Brockovich*, 2000, United States: Universal Studios.

^{iv} Marbie Babcock and Franklin Sheppard, *This is My Father's World*, in *Glory to God Hymnal*, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville), 2013.

^v Frederick Beuchner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (Harper & Row, 1979)