

As a mother of sons, not twins, but sons, I confess that this passage gives me pause. My boys are great kids, and I can't quite imagine Elliott trying to buy Alden's birthright for a pepperoni pizza, but after doing 12 years of youth ministry, I do know that adolescence can change people. I have known adolescents who have figuratively sold their birthright for less than a pot of lentils.

But you get the sense, after reading this text, that it wasn't adolescent angst that led to the split between the brothers. These brothers had been struggling against each other before they were even born. You wonder if, in utero, they knew what they were going to be in for as the children of Isaac and Rebekah. One of them would be loved by mom. One by dad. The affection of their parents would be handed out at a cost. They experienced love that was divisive and bred scarcity.

But, before I bad mouth Isaac too much, we should have some sympathy for him. Isaac, we recall, is the son of Abraham, who was promised to be the ancestor of many generations. Abraham was the receiver of the covenant and the promise. And the narrator of this text makes sure we remember Isaac's connection to Abraham from the beginning: "These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham was the father of Isaac...." But, for all of Abraham's fame, he did, we should remember, hike Isaac up a mountain, tie him up, and prepare to sacrifice him on an altar. God intervened at the last minute, offering a ram as a substitute. So, perhaps that is why the narrator reminds us of Abraham. Isaac's difficulty in relating to his own sons, could be directly connected to his relationship as a son to his father Abraham.

And despite what I suspect was also a conflicted relationship with God after that whole sacrifice plan, Isaac and Rebekah both turned to God and prayed for children. Despite the experiences he had in his own life and his own faith, he prayed to God for descendants, so the promise could continue.

Last week, when reading the Psalms, I noticed the Psalmist referred to God as "the God of Jacob". Since I'd been thinking about this text, I noticed that in a way I hadn't before. The God of Jacob? Why not the God of Esau, the eldest son who was tricked out of his birthright and blessing? Why the God of Jacob, the trickster born grabbing his brother's heel?

The notion of primogeniture, the law that allowed the eldest son to inherit the ranch, has a shaky record in the Bible, beginning with the first inheritors of Genesis, Adam and Eve's children. Cain murdered his younger brother, Abel, leaving brother #3, Seth to carry on. And on it goes. Isaac was, after all, Abraham's second son, inheriting the promise instead of Ishmael. And it will happen later with Jacob's children too. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are passed over in favor of Judah, son #4. And Joseph, Jacob's 11th child, will be annoyed when Jacob gives a grandfather's blessing to Joseph's youngest son instead of his firstborn. When Joseph tries to stop him, to get him to give the blessing to Manasseh instead of Ephraim, Jacob says, "I know, my son. I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." (Gen 48:19) What God said to Rebekah when she was pregnant, Jacob then repeats to his son.

The right of the firstborn to inherit is described in Deuteronomy—21:15-17 if you are interested—but it is not spelled out as a law there, only explained. This right was so prevalent across the world that it was just assumed. And as we see in these texts this morning, it was assumed as a reality, even by the men who were the beneficiaries of a subverted inheritance. Isaac, the second son of Abraham was planning on handing on his blessing and inheritance to his oldest son, Esau. Did he forget the grace he received as second son? The sons of Joseph, Jacob's grandchildren from his 11th child, should never have received their grandfather's blessing. Yet, when they did, Joseph didn't notice the grace of that unmerited blessing, and tried to restore the societal order, bringing the blessing to the firstborn.

So, what does primogeniture have to do with us? If you think Jacob and Esau are a story of something that happened long ago and far away, consider this article from the news this past year. A 70 year old woman in India gave birth to twins. She was already a mother of two daughters and grandmother to five, but she and her husband spent their life savings and took out a loan for In vitro fertilization because, and I quote, "We already have two girls but we wanted a boy so that he could have taken care of our property."¹ The father said, "The desire for a male child has always been there, but God did not bless us with a

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7491782.stm

male child. Now, we are very grateful to God, who has answered our prayers". The article did not report if either of the children was named "Esau" or "Jacob".

So, what does primogeniture have to do with us?

My husband and I are planning on dividing our assets equally among our children, as I suspect most of you will too. This practice, so prevalent throughout the world, even today, has lost ground in 21st century America, although I'm sure all of the oldest male children in the room might convincingly argue for its return. No, this isn't a sermon about estate planning.

Rather, let's consider how we as Christians, Americans, and Southminster-ans are recipients of the blessings of God. Because the other piece that is almost always at play when you read these narratives from Genesis is that while the stories are told about individuals and families, these stories are never just about the individuals. Jacob, we recall is given another name. After wrestling all night for a blessing by the river Jabbok, Jacob will be renamed Israel. The stories of Jacob are the stories of the creation of the people of Israel.

And there is other etymology at work in this text as well. Esau, covered in red hair and famished for red lentils has another name too—Edom, which means "red". And Edom was also the name of a people. Their territory was south of the Dead Sea, south of the territories of Judah and Moab. Today you would locate Edom in Southern Israel and Southern Jordan. In the New Testament, the region is referred to as Idumea.

Israel, the people, received the favor of God, the inheritance of the promise, at the cost of their brothers and sisters, the Edomites. But like the characters in Genesis, they seem to forget the grace that has gotten them where they are. Here is a reference to Edom in the Psalms: "Moab is my washbasin; on Edom I hurl my shoe..."(Psalm 60:8 and Psalm 108:9)

I'm not surprised a brother would say that to a brother—we see comments like that all the time at our house—but I think we should be

aware of our propensity to assume that we are somehow deserving of the unmerited grace we have received.

Christians, as we know, are relatively late comers to the Covenant of God. Yet, as soon as we were received into the Promise, what happened? Anti-semitism. You don't have to dig deeply in the pages of history to see that sad story played out, and playing out this past week at the Holocaust Museum in DC. We forgot how God had included us in the Promise and began to act as if God's favor had always been for Christians alone.

And America. As 4th of July weekend approaches, I confess to being conflicted about "God Bless America" signs I see on the bumpers of cars. I love this country. I am thankful for the freedoms we have and for the people who are even today making sacrifices for those freedoms. I am thankful for the opportunities in the US for education, for safe and civil society. Truly, our country has been blessed. All you have to do is watch the news and see people who are being killed in Iran for voting. People are imprisoned or killed for speaking their conscience in many countries. There are Christians in parts of the world who would be arrested if the government found them to be in possession of a Bible. Yes, we are blessed here. Yet, after all of these many years of blessing, do we sometimes hear in our political discourse that assumption that our blessings are somehow our birthright? How many of you made the choice to be born an American instead of a Zimbabwean, Pakistani, or Sudanese? How many of you made the decision, before you were born, to be born into privilege, security, wealth, and comfort?

In response to those God Bless America bumper stickers that would take credit for the blessings we have received for having the fortune to be born here, I would say that God has blessed America—now how are we being a blessing? Because all the way back in Genesis 12, when God first tells Abraham of the Blessing, that is the language. "I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing." How are we going to inherit the promise, to receive the blessings we have received and then be a blessing? Unfortunately, I see our society spending more time trying to hoard our blessing. Building walls, both literally and figuratively, to keep people out.

For us to be a blessing, for us to not despise our birthright, we need to find a way to pass on the grace we have received.

The Presbyterian Church has also been blessed. In our history, we have become a church that reaches out to its community, sharing the gospel, and passing on the grace we have received. This past week, we welcomed over 50 kids from the congregation and the community in here for Vacation Bible School. What a fun ministry to the community it was!

And over the years, we have continued to include people when other denominations would say no. As an ordained woman, I am thankful to be a Presbyterian, knowing that my sisters from some other denominations do not have the opportunities to respond to God's call in their lives as I do. I am thankful that society's tradition of inheritance has been subverted in the Presbyterian Church to make room for me.

And we are also like Esau and Jacob, brothers wrestling with each other for our inheritance. The General Assembly amendments about ordination standards failed to gain enough votes in the presbyteries. Yet even before GA, the concern about the future has become a part of denominational life. Churches have been leaving the denomination. What if more churches leave?

Have we become like Jacob, worried about taking our future in our own hands, not trusting that God will provide? Or are we also like Esau, worried more about the immediate present, willing to disregard our birthright for a quick fix of today's anxiety?

I'm not going to presume to know the answer. But, as we as a congregation and a denomination go forward into this future, we need to remember the grace we have received, the reason that God called the Presbyterian Church into being. We are a voice of hope for people without much voice. We are a voice of justice for people who have been silenced. We are a voice of love and grace in a world that can be narrow minded and mean.

As we move forward into our future, we need to not fight over birthrights and blessings. We need to remember the grace of God that has included us in God's family, the gift that brought us into the promise. While we meet together to discuss the issues that divide us, we

need to do so with love and grace. We need to remember that all of us love God and are seeking to serve God more faithfully. We need to let go of our right answers, and listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church.

What we can hold on to is this—the God who created us and called us to be here, to make up the community of Southminster Presbyterian Church, has blessed us to be a blessing. What we can hold on to is our commitment to the Gospel and to the promotion of social justice for all of God’s children and the rest of it will sort itself out.

We gather around this table each month, the ultimate sign and symbol of God’s grace. Where we are invited to a table we have not prepared, to a meal prepared for us in the life and death of God’s own son, Jesus. At this table, God again disrupts the order of inheritance. Even though Jesus should have been the inheritor of God’s blessing, we are the ones who receive the promise. Let us today, like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, claim our promise. And let us remember that there is room enough for all at this table. There is room enough for all in God’s favor. Amen.