***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: ESAU***

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Texts: Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-38 and Hebrews 12:14-17

Somewhere on everyone’s family tree there is a branch that is a little crooked or deformed or diseased, a branch that makes the tree a little less attractive, a branch that bears good fruit only by the grace of God. It is the branch you would lop off the tree, except that you can’t do that on a family tree, try as you might. Some years ago Karen’s dad developed an interest in family genealogy and did a deep dive into Karen’s mom’s family, tracing them back all the way to jolly old England in the Dark Ages. The good news was that she was related to royalty: William the Conqueror; the bad news was that she was also a descendant not of King Richard the Lionhearted but of his rotten brother Prince John, the villain of Robin Hood fame. We are all grateful for 700 years’ worth of dilution of that gene pool!

In the ancestral tree of our family of faith there are likewise some branches that are a little tainted; chief among them is Jacob, the patriarch for whom Israel is named. He is a significant figure in the story of our faith, one of those patriarchs by whom the Lord our God is known – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But he is, to put it plainly, a scoundrel; his story is one of deception and lies by which he claims the birthright that places him in the lineage that extends from Father Abraham through King David to Jesus the Messiah. While treachery surfaces in many forms throughout the Bible, Jacob’s deceptions play out primarily at the family dinner table. He is not just guilty of stealing a disproportionate share of the mashed potatoes. He takes advantage of his dim-witted brother and his old, blind father to claim for himself what rightfully belonged to Esau – the birthright and his father’s blessing.

You heard the story in that extended passage from Genesis that I read moments ago, so I won’t repeat it all, but some details are worth noting. The first is that the writer in Genesis seems to suggest that Jacob and Esau are destined from the beginning to be in conflict. They struggle with each other so much before birth that Rebekah laments to the Lord, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” There is a Chinese proverb that says: “*It is not economical to go to bed early to save the candles if the result is twins.”*[[1]](#endnote-1) That might well have been the case for Isaac and Rebekah. They had longed for a child, had prayed for a child, and their prayers were doubly answered when they were blessed with twins. Yet, the prenatal struggles led Rebekah to wonder aloud if these twins were really such a blessing.

Esau is born first, making him the eldest son; Jacob enters the world just moments later as the second son, born literally on the heels of his brother. The struggle then is between the elder son and the younger; it is a struggle to be the blessed heir of the father. This struggle is not just about sibling rivalry; it is also about economics and the claim to the greater share of the family estate. It is also about being heir to that covenant between the Lord and Abraham, to be the one through whom the world is blessed.

The first theft happens at the kitchen table when Esau agrees to trade his birthright for a bowl of red lentil stew. There is no deception here, yet there is no honor either. Jacob tells his hungry brother that if he wants some stew he must give up his right as the firstborn son. It is the kind of deal that brothers offer in jest, but the writer suggests this offer was not just fraternal kidding around. Jacob is serious. Had my brother offered me such a deal, I would have responded, “I have a deal for you. You give me the stew and I DON’T clobber you!” But not Esau! He just consents. He surrenders his birthright for a bowl of red stew. Something precious, something cherished by generations of eldest sons is cast aside in a selfish moment to satisfy the rumblings of his stomach. Esau claims to be dying of hunger, yet as soon as he eats and drinks his fill, he jumps up from the table and goes on his way. He is willing to mortgage the future to satisfy his present desire.

Esau’s cavalier behavior seems to prove that he is unworthy to be a significant part of God’s covenantal plan. Abraham picked up his tent pegs to go wherever God led him and was ready to sacrifice his son, if that is what the Lord wanted, but Esau seems not to value his place in that covenantal line. He is so focused on immediate gratification that he is unable to see his place in the larger arc of God’s plan under the covenant.

Do you make such tradeoffs, compromising your future for the sake of the present, surrendering your part in God’s plan to satisfy a more selfish desire? From every corner of our culture we are encouraged to scratch the itch of material comforts now without looking to the future. We are told we’ve been *pre-approved* or *specially selected* to accumulate more debt so that we can buy more things we don’t really need. We mortgage the future to feed the insatiable hunger for immediate satisfaction without considering our responsibility as heirs to God’s covenant, our place in God’s plan. So it was with Esau and his birthright.

While Esau must share the blame for loss of his birthright, the blame for stealing Isaac’s blessing lies squarely with Jacob and his mother. From their youth, Esau, the hunter, was his father’s favorite; and Jacob, the boy about the house, was the apple of his mother’s eye. Rather than loving both boys equally, these parents played favorites – with dire consequences. They couldn’t see that each boy had something of value, something to be cherished and loved as a son. They made their choices. Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob.

Most parents find enough love in their hearts to embrace all their children. Different as children may be, they love each one without distinction. Some first time parents wonder whether they will ever love a second child as much as the first; then the second arrives and they discover there is an infinite well of love from which to draw. It is that kind of unlimited love that God has for us, a love that does not play favorites but embraces us all as children of God. We dare not think that God loves us any more or any less than our brothers and sisters. You may have seen the bumper sticker:

***Jesus loves you,***

***but he loves me more!***

but that does not describe the God who created us, a God who loves us all with a never-ending love, a God who does not play favorites, unlike Isaac and Rebekah!

As you heard, Isaac’s health and eyesight were failing fast in his old age; he knew that before he died he must pass on the blessing he received from his father, Abraham. The blessing would go to Esau. Instead of just calling him in and blessing him, Isaac decides to do it over a meal. He sends Esau out to hunt for game, bring it home, and cook it for him. When Esau returned with this gift in hand, Isaac would give him the blessing. But as Esau headed out with bow in hand, Rebekah put her own plan into action. She helped Jacob deceive his father into thinking that it was Esau to whom he was giving the blessing when in fact it was Jacob. Rebekah’s plan is to secure the blessing for Jacob by betraying her son Esau and her husband Isaac.

Why would she do such a thing? Was her love for Jacob so great that she was willing to do anything to secure his future? Or was she recalling the word of the Lord that came to her when she was pregnant and lamented the struggle of the twins within her:

*Two nations are in your womb, and two people born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.*

Did she see this result as inevitable, her role in this divine plan necessary? We don’t know. All we know is that Rebekah and Jacob conspired to deceive Isaac with food, lies and goat skins. Isaac is deceived by the smell of Esau’s clothes, the touch of the goat skins and the lies Jacob tells, and so he grants the blessing – not to Esau as he supposes, but to Jacob who accepts it in violation of two commandments: “you shall not steal” and “honor your father”. Isaac asks God to bless this son, to grant prosperity and authority to this son who he thinks is Esau but who is in reality the son who has been unfaithful to him and to God.

By the time Esau comes in from the hunt to receive his blessing, it is too late; the deception is revealed. Isaac’s lip quivers and Esau cries aloud when they realize what has happened – Jacob has deceived his father and stolen the blessing. There is but one blessing to give, and it has been given to Jacob who runs for the hills with blessing and birthright in hand. And so in the end everyone is unhappy – Isaac who has been deceived and Esau whose blessing has been stolen, Jacob who runs for his life and Rebekah who is separated from the son she loves and must live out her days with the husband and son she helped to deceive.

The twins eventually reconcile, and go their separate ways, but the generations that follow will remember this story; they will hold grudges; they will remain suspicious of one another; they will live in conflict. Wars will be fought; sons and daughters will die, but the blessing remains with Jacob and his descendants. Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. O that father and mother had loved both boys and raised them to love one another! Perhaps we can do better with our children – love them each, love them all, love them though they be different from one another and from us, love them as God loves them – with a love that never ends.

In our family tree this story is not one of our prouder branches. Jacob is one of the oldest and shrewdest roots from whom we descend. One wonders why God would choose to be associated with such a deceitful rogue! Perhaps it is to prove that God can do great things, faithful things, in us and through us and even despite us. For if God could keep God’s promise with a scoundrel like Jacob, maybe God can keep God’s promise with scoundrels like us. For, unlike the blessing of Isaac, God has enough blessings to go around, a blessing for each of us, a blessing to which we are heirs one and all through Jesus Christ.

Now we can fight over that blessing like Jacob and Esau – fight to be the blessed rather than the unblessed, or fight to be the most blessed rather than the least blessed. But Jesus seems to suggest that those who are blessed are not those we expect to be blessed, and so we might do better to follow his command and love one another, trusting that there are indeed enough blessings to go around. We might do better to follow the advice of the letter to the Hebrews and *pursue peace with everyone* – not just with some, not just with those just like us, but with everyone*.* *Blessed are the peacemakers*, says Jesus, *for they shall be called children of God*! How much better the world might be, how much more blessed, if we all became peacemakers and pursued peace – with the Jacobs and the Esaus and all the children of God! Amen

1. www.quotegarden.com [↑](#endnote-ref-1)