

Sermon: Where are the Men of the Field?

Year A, Proper 10

[Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#)

Offered July 16, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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We've been blessed. We go to college and wait to start earning money. We take on more debt than we can imagine ever getting rid of. We get jobs working mostly with our brains and our fingers on keyboards. We're exhausted, brain tired at the end of the day. We have to have gym membership because we need to get our bodies at least a little worn out if we're going to sleep at night. It's challenging because we constantly have to keep upgrading our skills. We have to figure out how to take meetings at six in the morning or nine at night because the teams we work on are now based in Lahore, Pakistan. And somewhere in there we hear that globalization is lifting more people out of poverty in that last two decades than have been lifted out of poverty than ever before in the history of humanity. So clearly that's a part of God's plan.

Then we are confronted with a guy complaining that his life is turned upside down because the factory is moving to Mexico or the coal fired power plants are shutting down. It's so easy to think, "Dude, you made a bad call. Plenty of people saw the way this was going. You took the pottage and gave up the birth right."

Because that's what this story is about, right? Giving up a birth right for a mess of pottage. How many modern examples are there of that? In this past week, Congress and the White House have had uncountable stories of people making a short term deal for a minimal gain that doesn't look so clever in retrospect. But I think I could say that just about every week. That image of handling the short term and sacrificing the long term comes up again and again. Climate change. Subprime mortgages being bundled together to support market derivatives. Heck, the designated hitter rule.

In today's reading we see the third generation of Abraham's family arriving. This family of promise is now a family of blessing. The father of the next generation is Isaac, the child of God's promise. The mother is Rebekah, a woman of good stock who has been carefully selected for this role.¹ Everything is looking so promising. There was a time where it looked like Rebekah was barren, but Isaac prays and God answers Isaac's prayer (Genesis 25:21). When the pregnancy is a tough one, Rebekah asks God what's going on and God answers her directly. Not only is Abraham the father of two nations, from his sons Ishmael and Isaac, but Isaac two will be the father of two nations (Genesis 25:23). With this third generation, the promise still remains, and remains strong. There is a connection between the family and God. But now there is a new element, a blessing, which shows up in a much more earthly and earthy way.² Jacob's whole story will focus on prosperity, fertility, and well-being and how they show up in normal, earthly life.³

Jacob is a child of promise and has received a special blessing from God. And what does he have? He has a life of conflict. He fights with his brother Esau. He wrangles with his father-in-law Laban. He argues with his wife. He struggles with his sons about how they will live in

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 212.

² Brueggemann, 207.

³ Brueggemann, 207.

Canaan. He even wrestles with God, not giving an inch.⁴ Blessing brings the conflict. We are children of the promise and we are people of the blessing and that doesn't mean that we get a conflict free life. In fact Jesus seems to be very clear that following him will mean our lives will be full of conflict.

The first conflict, the one which will frame his life, is the conflict with his brother Esau. Esau's described as "red" and "hairy" (Genesis 25:25). He grows up to be a skilled hunter, a man of the field. (Genesis 25:27) Do you hear the kids on the playground, teasing someone who was a different color, who was too hairy, who had no video game skills? When he comes in hungry from the day's hunting, we see a guy who couldn't wait. We see a guy taking what's needed for his well being, eating, drinking rising and going on his way. We see a guy who doesn't understand that well-being is a gift from God that can't be managed solely by us mortals. So we get down on him. He gave away his birthright because he was a knucklehead.

But here's how Esau's world worked. The first born son gets two times the share of the father's wealth as anyone else. He becomes the head of the family in time. As he grows he gets the best and the most food, so he is likely to be the strongest and healthiest. He's going to be the most powerful in the family so he gets the benefit of the doubt if there are borderline moral calls to be made.⁵ This isn't just a rule of thumb like not wearing white after Labor Day. This is the linchpin of the entire social and legal system that surrounds them; it provides a way to avoid conflicts which can become deadly.⁶ First sons getting the best deal arises as the community is making the transition from a nomadic life to a settled agricultural life. It used to be that all men were hunters. Being a good hunter meant your family had more resources. But as they transition to farming that isn't the case anymore. Esau is really good at something, something that used to be super important. But when this story was originally told, long before it was included as part of a sacred text, hunting was waning as a way to secure resources.

If you were in Esau's shoes, you didn't make a bad call. This whole thing the Jacob did with the lentil stew is just weird. You can't give up your birthright, or not like that, not without your father weighing in. As the oldest son, you're set up and nothing the younger son can do, on his own, will change that.

So have we misunderstood this story for all these thousands of years? That doesn't seem likely. But what if this story, like the story of Abraham, like the story of Isaac, is not so much about Jacob and Esau as it is about what their lives tell us about God? Jacob did nothing to merit his blessing. God chose and God did not say why. Jacob was still in Rebekah's womb when God told her that the elder would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). Jacob hadn't done anything as his own person to merit the blessing. This story is one of God stepping in on the side of the person which human rules would give short shrift to. First sons getting the best deal is a great system if you are the oldest son. Otherwise, it's kind of a crappy system. So God steps in. There is no part of how the world works in human terms that constrains God.

While we will follow Jacob in the next few weeks, we won't see Esau again during worship. So let me tell you end the end of his story. When next we see Esau, he will embrace his brother,

⁴ Brueggemann, 208.

⁵ Cuthbert A. Simpson, "The Book of Genesis: Exegesis," vol. 1 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 668.

⁶ Brueggemann, 208.

refuse his brothers' gifts, claiming he has plenty already. Esau will move off the family land to another part of the world, nearby, and his line will flourish as well. Look at the insert in your bulletin. He had tons of descendants.

This story is not one that says you make one bad call and God writes you off forever. God did not say that Esau did not receive blessings as well as Jacob. God has blessings and conflicts for everyone. The guys whose factories are moving, whose coal mines are closing, were relying on a human system of how the world works to provide for their well being. That human system has faded away, replaced by another human system. So are these guys going to train to manage software outsourcing in Lahore? Maybe. Or maybe they have other blessings that they are not yet seeing that they could use some help identifying and making the most of. Maybe those blessings will appear more readily to someone who works with their brains and their fingers on a keyboard.

There is no earthly reason God chose Jacob. God just did. Jacob's life was harder for that. There is no earthly reason why God chose us for blessings. God just did. Our lives are harder for those blessings. But God has blessings for everyone. Sometimes the conflict they provoke is what's needed to have the community respond to make sure that the weaker and more vulnerable can capitalize on their blessings too. God steps in to bless the weaker and more vulnerable so we understand that we need to step in on behalf of the weaker and the more vulnerable. Especially when we are the beneficiaries of human systems that are working in our favor. We need to seek out the men like Esau, who are men of the fields. We need to find the men of the fields and share our blessings with them, even if that means finding ourselves amidst more conflict.