**FAMISHED**

July 16, 2017

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Text: *Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am afamished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.)*

Genesis 25:30

D

eborah Boak has been planning a reunion in Western, Pennsylvania for the summer of 2018. She has located 460 people who trace their relationship to Robert and Roger Boak. Now, I really don’t know Deborah. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, but she has been tracking an extensive network of relationships and I do know many of the people she has located, some of whom I haven’t seen since I was a boy. It will probably be a meaningful gathering when it happens.

Way back in 1996 our family headed to Washington, Pennsylvania to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of my parents. It was a reunion of sorts, too. They were married in the chapel at Oberlin, Ohio and only 8 people attended, the parents and siblings of each. They had no wedding cake that day, but cut their first one that afternoon in 1996 in the club house of the condominium to which they had retired. It sits on a high hill, a part of the Presbyterian retirement center in Washington. Friends came from all over. There were no fancy gifts. Some brought cards, others had sent along letters which had been compiled into a large book, for when one is older, one discovers that it is the memories and relationships of this life that are important. Things matter little at this point.

I greeted and welcomed people I didn’t know, but who were able to tell me about early encounters, times before I can remember personal history. I don’t know many of the particulars of my own birth, except to discover that it also took place in Oberlin in a hospital that had only four beds at the time. My parents remained only a brief while after delivery and then moved to Pittsburgh, taking up residence behind the old Buhl mansion in the carriage house. Eventually the family grew by two.

When my sisters and I got together in Avalon, NJ this past week, we could see that we siblings have retained some of our personality characteristics, shaped somewhat by the humility that comes from rearing your own children. There in Avalon we were present for the baptism of Vivian Lewis, named after my mother, Vivian. All of the Boak clan cousins were there, much like this vast horde of Pollocks are here this morning, tracing so much of their origin as a family to Ted and Dolly.

But, I suspect that such reunions would have been more difficult for the sons of Isaac. If you remember the story we have been following in Genesis this summer, we left off with an arranged marriage for Isaac. Chapter 25 of Genesis begins by telling us how Abraham had married Keturah and then at the age of 175 died in a god old age. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. Abraham was buried there with his wife Sarah. It is surprising for us to see that Ishmael, the son of Hagar, who had been banished to the desert with his mother when he was a boy because of Sarah’s jealousy, was present at the funeral. At this point these two step brothers seemed to have patched up differences.

Isaac inherited everything from his father, including God’s promise to make his descendants into a great nation. He was forty years old when he married Rebekah. But, things weren’t going well. Isaac fired up a prayer to the Lord, because Rebekah was unable to conceive. This was a problem for we readers of this history in the Bible know what Isaac knows, that God told Abraham that a great family, more numerous than the stars of heaven, would arise out of this old man’s loins. How were they to fulfill the promise. Rebekah’s barrenness to the biblical reader is actually more a problem of theology than of gynecology. God answered Isaac’s prayer and God fulfilled the request. It is here that the trouble begins, “Rebekah conceived,” and even in her womb there was conflict, there in the mysterious uterine darkness were two fetuses engaged in struggle. Rebekah could feel the conflict before the children were born. Remember how the text told us:

*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.*

She is going to be especially grateful for those Lamaze classes pretty soon. Imagine, twins! She inquires of the Lord and the Almighty explains (according to one exegete), “At first I thought I’d just bless you with a child. Then I decided, while I was at it, to give you twins . . . not just two boys, but two whole nations in your womb. You thought this birth was a little something to comfort you and the impatient paranoid Isaac over here. No, I’m doing something cosmic and when you do something this big, you are bound to feel the kicking of the future of the world.” We can imagine Rebekah asking, “Well, Lord, this is your idea of a blessing?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In time, Rebekah gives birth. The first twin to be delivered is “red, all his body is covered in hair.” So, they named the first. He was called “Red,” or Edom. He wasn’t the kind of baby that had the nurses saying, “My what a pretty baby.” From the unflattering description we get here, he looked more like a red, wooly sweater and the name Edom is sometimes thought not only to mean “red” but “hairy” as well. When they pulled Red out of the womb, they were startled to find the second twin, the younger boy. He had gripped his brother’s heel tightly, clasping it in his newly minted little hand. The attending “obstetrician” or midwife called attention to it. They named him Jacob, which probably means “heel” in that ancient tongue, an appropriate name we shall discover later.

So, years later at wedding anniversary parties people will tell the story of how we got Red and his little brother Heel . . . Esau and Jacob. These were not identical twins. They were different. Esau was the macho type. He owned a pick-up with a gun rack above the rear window. He was a member of the NRA, played football for his High School Team and loved to go fishing and sit around camp fires telling risqué stories. He’d flip through copies of *Field and Stream* and drool over some of the new gear. Sometimes he’d dream about buying a new Harley Davidson. He kept his wallet on a chain and shaved about once a week.

Jacob was a “quiet man living in tents.” He was more of a stay-at-home, indoor type. He played the piano, learned how to cook from his mother, and felt that football encourages violence. He read more intellectual stuff like Chaucer and Shakespeare and magazines like, *Gourmet Cooking* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. He didn’t own any hunting boots or cleats. Oh, once and a while he’d shoot a little pool, usually in the basement, though never in one of those musty, smoke-hazed billiard parlors where the real sharks showed up with their ques in leather cases. Perhaps it is not surprise that the Bible says: “Isaac loved having Esau . . . but Rebekah loved Jacob.” One seemed to be closer to Dad, the other to Mom. Can’t you imagine Isaac’s disappointment when he bought Jacob a new bow and quiver and he just let it sit in the corner or when Rebekah made Esau a new shirt, frills on the cuffs, and he just let it stay on the hanger in the closet, preferring to wear his leather vest, because that showed off the tattoos on his left arm.

Now, Isaac and Rebekah weren’t bad parents, per se. They didn’t love one child more than the other. They were real parents, trying to relate to their children, and were more naturally drawn to the child that seemed to have similar tastes and attitudes as themselves. Now the story related here was compiled long before Dr. Spock and *Good Housekeeping* were able to provide insight.

One day . . . Jacob was creating in the kitchen. He looked up, not because he could see anything, but because he could tell from the odor that his hairy brother Esau was standing in the room. He probably just got back from a hunting trip, deer draped over the hood of his jeep. Esau is famished and the smell coming out of the pot Jacob is stirring is pretty good. “Give me some of that red stuff your cooking. I’m starved.” Jacob says, “It’s not `red stuff’ it is *boeuf bouruignon.*” And for desert there is ice cup black forest.

Whatever. . . says Esau, “I’m starvin’!’”

“Starving?” asked Jacob. “O, come now, brother, let me stir in a little sour cream and then. . .

“I said, I’m starving!”

“Okay, let me have your birthright and I’ll let you eat.”

Now, this may not seem like a big deal to us, but it was immensely important to the ancients. The first-born son, even if only by a few seconds, received advantages and responsibilities. A unique status from the father was conferred, a double portion of the inheritance. We can read about later in the collection of laws in Deuteronomy. This meant that considerable prestige, power, and property were involved in the birthright as well as the pressures of caring for the tribe.

We don’t know if Jacob was concerned that Esau showed little interest in the family books or if he was involved in a power play. Despite having more than his fair share of faults, Jacob knew origin of value. We might say that the Esaus of this world can tread selfish, self-indulgent paths to destruction, while the opportunist Jacobs ultimately get ahead. Nothing is neat, other than to recognize that we all have our sinful side.

It is interesting to note that the unusual trading of the birthright recorded in this chapter was not an isolated event. The clay tablets which were discovered in the Northeastern Iraqi city of Nuzi in the late 1920s have shed considerable light on the patriarchal period because they recount independently what life was like at that time. Esau’s transaction is seen in even worse light when we note that one of the Nuzi tablets tells of a similar trade, but the man in question at least regarded his birthright as worth “three sheep.” To Esau it was worth a bowl of porridge.

Actually, Jacob was saying to his brother, “Why don’t you drop dead.” If Esau were to have had a myocardial infarction just moments later, then Jacob would have more naturally become the owner of the birthright. Esau was unable to take the long view or fathom the consequences of his compulsiveness. He was about to give everything away for a bowl of bean soup. Esau came off with the short end of the stick from his ever so slightly younger brother.

Thus, the story ends for the day and we are left wondering about the moral of all of this. What does God want us to know?

🞟 It is natural for brothers to fight?

🞟 All brawn and no brain is not good?

🞟 Do not think with your stomach?

🞟 Be careful of clever opportunists?

🞟 There is a theological spin to even family history?

🞟 Things may be different than they appear?

There does seem to be a message of caution that acting on impulse, satisfying immediate desire without pausing to consider the long-range consequences of what we are about to do is an important message in this passage. We know that we can fall into that trap. When we see something we want, our first impulse is to get it.

At first, we feel intensely satisfied and sometimes even powerful because we have obtained what we set out to get. But immediate pleasure often loses sight of the future. We can avoid making Esau’s mistake by comparing the short-term satisfaction with its long-range consequences. We can rationalize most anything. We think, “If I’m starving, what good is a birthright, anyway?” The pressure of the moment distorts our perspective and makes our decisions appear to be urgent. When there is sexual pressure, a marriage vow may seem unimportant. If we want that house bad enough, then we may end up sacrificing an even, more important opportunity.

Maybe even more unsettling is the thought that something even bigger is at work. Let’s just assume, for consideration that most of us are like Esau . . . not that we are as red, hairy or macho, but that we are privileged. This is to say that we are fortunate from birth. Society has blessed us with advantages and we will inherit the estate when our time comes. Then, we find ourselves in the story as the one who is surprised.

What happens to the once self-assured nation, planning to use the same power that our forbearers enjoyed? Suddenly the nation begins to come to its senses only to discover that the Social Security System is going bankrupt, that the fleecing of America has been taking place, that new immigrants take their citizenship and right to vote more seriously. When we sit on our haunches smugly satisfied with our social position, more eager to be served than to serve we can suddenly wake up to discover that the world is rapidly changing.

Is the world rearranged so that as Jesus would later say, “the first shall be last and the last first?” What happens even before the great throne of grace when our day to account comes near and the Almighty one says, “Well, I blessed you. What did you do with the blessing? Give me a good reason or two why the Kingdom should be yours.”

Do we suppose that the Lord of the world will be impressed when we say, “Well, my grandfather was a Presbyterian minister, my mother taught Sunday School, I have an aunt that is a nun and I used to go to Sunday School when I was a kid.” Can we presume on God’s grace to grant us a position in the Kingdom of Eternity solely on the basis of our birth order? Or our birthright? Or have we spiritually become amused with impulsive responses to the point that we have given up what would have easily been ours?

Or perhaps, we are among those who feel that we have no birthright . . . we have been on the outside of the family. There is no older brother for us from whom we can even steal or swindle one. We don’t count. We’re too foolish.

I once went to an art exhibition with some unusual pieces. One of my favorites in this show was a piece by Doug Beekman entitled *Spellcheck*. It showed a medieval wizard, complete with robe sitting at a computer and it suggested a marvelous interplay of the definitions we give to the word, “spell.” David Mattingly’s painting, “Subway Wizard” was there, too. He pictured a wizard standing on a crowded subway, only his feet were not touching the floor. But, tucked away in a corner was this small painting entitled “Master of Whitestory.” You had to stoop to read the note beside the artwork. “This is a portrait of a mercenary hero who takes on other peoples’ problems for his own and fights for lost causes. But as he brings peace and healing to their lives, he becomes more haunted by his own past.” The figure appeared to be almost like *Don Quixote*.

I thought to myself, “What happens to the mercenary servant who takes on other peoples’ problems for his own and fights for lost causes? Then as he brings and peace and healing to their lives, he becomes more haunted by his own future?”

Might we find ourselves in this Old Testament account as Jacob and Esau, with both sinful natures and because of that, question our identity and where we belong? Do we wonder about what tribe or family to which we belong?

Might we find ourselves in this Old Testament account as Jacob and Esau, with both sinful natures and because of that, question our identity and where we belong?

I remember talking to a pastor who took some vacation time and headed to the Smokey Mountains with his wife. They wanted to be alone, together. Just about the time they entered the Smokies, they stopped at a restaurant. It wasn’t a chain, but clearly had traditional, local fare. While waiting for their waitress, one of those ladies with a pencil in her hair that called everyone, “Honey” they spied a man moving from table to table.

He would greet folks, lean over their food and chat. Sometimes he sat down beside them or scooched his way into their booth. They hoped that that whatever he did, he didn’t make his way over to their table. But, before their food arrived so did he.

He began to tell his family story. His mother was single. The most feared question he ever got was, “Whose boy are you?” He said that long ago you just didn’t want to be the child of a single mother. People talked and so the answer to the question, “Whose boy are you”” was always embarrassing.

One day, he said, he heard about a new preacher in town and that he usually gave a good sermon and so he went. What happened was exactly what he feared would happen.

“This new pastor put his big hand on my shoulder and asked the question I dreaded, ‘Whose boy are you?’ Then he said to me, ‘Oh, I see who you are, you are a child of God. I can see the family resemblance.’ When the pastor said that, I had my first real sense that I belonged in this world. It gave me a birthright I didn’t know I had. By the way, I’m Ben Hopper, been elected governor of Tennessee twice. We’re glad to have you in our village.”

The church should be a place where everyone is known as a child of God. This is why our support of ministry at In Step is so important for it is a place where we can tangibly say through our support, that this is a place where each child there is a part of the family and is blessed with a spiritual birthright. It is a message that as a congregation we share to each child here.

Some of the children at In Step have never known their parents, but they do know that they are part of a spiritual family that is In Step.

Adam, why don’t you come here and tell us what it is like when you don’t know who your parents are and you are one of 172 children in an orphanage.

1. William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1996, p. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)