

Birthright and Blessing

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Genesis 28:10-19 (NRSV) Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Matthew 13:24-30 (NRSV) The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

When I first read these 2 passages, the story in Genesis of Jacob and his dream, and the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew, I didn't really see the connection between the two. Parables, as we all know, are often hard to understand. What you didn't hear this morning in the Matthew passage is the bit that follows a few verses later where Jesus takes his disciples aside, and upon their request explains the parable to them. He describes the field as the kingdom of God, the sower of the good seed as the Son of Man, the sower of the bad seed as the devil, and angels as the reapers. Still didn't see the connection. After doing a little botanical research, it seems there is a weed common in Israel that looks exactly like wheat in the early stages of growth. It is only just before the wheat is ready to be harvested that the ear of the stalk, and they call it the ear, weighted down by the grain, starts to droop, but the ear of the weed remains upright. Then, and only then, can you tell the difference. It seems that Jesus is telling his disciples that we as humans are quick to judge and can't always tell the good from the bad, or can't always see deep into the heart of others, but God can, and that judgment therefore belongs to God.

Now speaking of the good and the bad, we have the story of Jacob and Esau, which reads like a reality TV show, a saga about a family that one author described as hugely dysfunctional. Since I don't believe we have been following the lectionary every week, I'd like to briefly speak to what precedes the passage in Genesis and what follows it.

This family saga is actually the history of Israel from the time of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, to the stories of their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, and now to the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, twin boys, Jacob and Esau, who struggled in the womb of Rebekah.

Rebekah prays to God asking why she is experiencing this internal turmoil. God reveals to Rebekah his prophecy, that the younger son will prevail over the older son, that the older son will serve the younger. Esau is born first with Jacob close behind grasping his brother's heel. These boys couldn't be more different. Esau is big and strong, muscular and hairy, and prefers hunting. He is also impatient and quick tempered and favored by Isaac. Jacob is quieter and referred to as a "tent dweller." He is cunning and shrewd and favored by his mother.

We don't know if Rebekah told either Isaac or Jacob about God's prophecy, or if Jacob was simply acting out of his own desires, but he manages to take advantage of a hungry and impatient Esau, and trades his bowl of stew for Esau's birthright. Jacob then, in collusion with his mother, tricks his dying and nearly blind father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau. Esau, understandably, is furious about being cheated out of both his birthright and his blessing, and he threatens to kill Jacob. Rebekah overhears his threat and convinces Isaac to send Jacob to her brother's house in Haran, ostensibly to find a suitable wife, but also to distance him from his brother's wrath. And this is where our story today begins. Jacob is on the run. Alone, vulnerable, and in unfamiliar territory. He goes as far as he can on the first day and stops when the sun starts to set. Finding a smooth stone to use as a pillow he falls asleep and dreams. He sees a huge ladder extending all the way from the earth to the heavens with angels ascending and descending. God stands at the base of the ladder next to Jacob and speaks to him. This may be Jacob's first encounter with God. Although Jacob surely knew about God, up to this point there has been no mention of any relationship between the two. God proceeds to pronounce a second blessing upon Jacob and promises to always be with him. Jacob awakes and remembers his dream, and is awestruck. And this is the line that particularly struck me. Jacob says, "God must be in this place and I did not

know it.” He assigns God to that place, as if God could be assigned to one space. Jacob then marks the spot, re-naming it Bethel, which means House of God, and consecrating it by erecting and anointing his stone pillow with oil. He is fully aware of God now, and this appears to be the beginning of his relationship with God. However, in the passage that follows, Jacob treats this encounter with God like a transaction, stating that if God makes this promise to him, he will do something for God, as if there are conditions to God's promise. He may have entered into a relationship with God, but he has a long way to go in getting right with God. He continues his calculating and deal making ways in his interactions with his uncle, his negotiations for a wife, and eventually in his journey home to reconcile with his brother.

What do we make of these characters, none of whom are particularly commendable candidates for God's favor. Aren't we somewhat offended by the moral ambiguity in this family? And yet, as we learned in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, who are we to judge? It is beyond our knowledge, our vision, and our understanding to fully discern God's purpose.

And this brings me to the birthright and the blessing. What is the difference? Both speak of property and inheritance. Both speak of leadership and power. In a patriarchal society such as this, it was the custom to transfer these rights and privileges onto the first born son. But the birthright is a human construct, a way of organizing and controlling a social order. Aren't there certain privileges bestowed upon us by our society just by virtue of having been born. Blessings, on the other hand, both human and divine, speak more to relationship; there is something intimate about a blessing, something one on one. It wasn't a social construct, it was a gift. Esau, as he sobs at his father's bedside, certainly seemed more distraught about losing his father's blessing than losing his birthright, that losing the blessing

was perhaps a far greater loss.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, she offers 12 spiritual practices, the last of which is the practice of pronouncing blessings. In this chapter she speaks about the wisdom she has learned over the years about blessings:

“The first piece of wisdom [in pronouncing a blessing] is that a blessing does not confer holiness. The holiness is already there, embedded in the very givenness of the thing..... A second piece of wisdom ... is that the practice requires you to ease up on holding the line between what is bad for you and what is good.....you give up thinking you are smart enough always to tell the difference between the two. [And] the last piece of wisdomis that pronouncing a blessing puts you as close to God as you can get. To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love – this is to land at God's breast. To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective....to participate in God's own initiative....to share God's own audacity.” (p. 206)

John O'Donohue describes the world as our first blessing. This must be why so many of us encounter God in the natural world. By resting his ear on that stone pillow, it was as if Jacob was resting his ear on God's breast.

We all have the power to bless. We do this each Sunday when we pass the peace of Christ. Judy and Will bless us at the end of worship in the form of a benediction. And we are often called to carry this blessing out into the world and to share it with others. What if our

ability to bless was each of our birthrights, something we all inherited and practiced? We are chosen by God. We have been blessed by God and by each other. And we are God's blessing in the world, a world that desperately needs more blessings. Amen.

Laurie has been a member of FCCW since 1983. Laurie has served the church in a variety of capacities: teaching church school and Journey to Adulthood, serving on Outreach, Membership, Diaconate and Worship Ministries, and the interim pastor search committee. She is currently a member of the Adult Faith Exploration Ministry, Ripley Working Group and the Ruth Group. She is mother to Helen and George, mother-in-law to Josh, and grandmother to Adelle, Evelyn and Isla.