

Genesis 25:21-34

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

word count: 1,707

Think of this summer at IUCC as “soap opera Sundays” as the lectionary reveals more about the families that sprang from Abraham. If you are just tuning in, in our last episode, Rebekah agreed to marry Isaac sight-unseen and was led away by the mysterious, unnamed servant to where the two lovers met outside Isaac’s deceased mother’s tent, where passion ensued.

In this week’s segment, two brothers cannot get along, and a family is split. Isaac and Rebekah’s sons fight even in the womb, where Esau manages to be born first with Jacob a close second, clutching at his heel. Esau earns the birthright because he was born first. Esau is his dad’s son—he is hairy and macho, likes to hunt, fish, go out with the boys, and bowls in the mid-200’s.

Jacob is quiet and thoughtful. He likes to stay inside the household tents with mom, where they watch Rachel Ray and cook together. They read David Sedaris’ newest essays to each other, laugh, and everything is really very nice. He is also a bit of an opportunist who knows how to survive. Esau has the birthright of inheritance as the first-born, but doesn’t care. Jacob doesn’t have it but wants it, and gets it—for a bowl of stew.

Two young brothers are hanging around the kitchen and one says, “I’d give anything for whatever that is you’re cooking.” The other brother says, “Oh, yeah? Like what?” The first brother says, “I’m so hungry I’m gonna *die*—anything!” The second brother stirs his ladle in the pot and says, “How about your birthright?” And...the first brother says, “Yeah...”I’m so hungry I’d give you my birthright.”

“Cross your heart?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

This is the part of the story that throws me. None of these people appear to understand “hyperbole” at all. Rebekah, upon hearing that Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright, doesn’t bother to mediate between the brothers over the exaggerated promise a boy might make. Instead, she takes Esau literally, and sets to work making sure that Jacob will be the one to inherit the new land of Israel, and Esau will be left with a hick burg called “Edom.”

Hyperbole is alive in almost every conversation between kids. That’s why it is so surprising that Esau actually lost his birthright so easily. Today, two young brothers might be working out a similar sibling rivalry over food, and it would go like this: “Gimme me your peanut-butter sandwich.”

“What’ll you give me for it?”

“I’ll give you a million dollars.”

“Oh yeah? From where?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it.”

“OK. Here.”

Now mom enters the scene: “Jimmy, you told Bobby you’d give him a million dollars for his PBJ sandwich. You don’t have a million dollars, now do you?”

“No.”

“Where are you going to get it, Jimmy?”

“I Dunno.”

“Well, you should have thought about that before you said it. Now, you’re going to have to go out and *work for the rest of your life* to pay Bobby what you owe him for his sandwich. Maybe next time you won’t promise to give away more than you have. Now you go up to your room. And, you might want to pack a few things...”

In the midst of this soap opera where Esau is surprised to find that he has given away so much by saying something so off-handed; in this household beset by conflict and alienation, competition and dysfunction that splits brothers, parents and even nations, is there any good news?

Jacob challenges and overturns all expectations in the patriarchal household. Not only does he gain the birthright, in the story, the alienated, estranged and anti-macho Jacob is God’s means of reaching out to the nations. And eventually he and Esau will reconcile. The incredibly surprising and hopeful message is that there are no permanent enemies.

In the story of the beginning of Israel comes the lesson *that there are no permanent enemies*, something we need to believe. Is this true in your own situation? In whatever unfairness or division that has occurred in your own families or among friends or co-workers, is it possible to believe that there are no permanent enemies...and what does it mean to “love our enemies”?

Jacob has the birthright, which is defined by the dictionary as “privileges or possessions that a person has or is believed to be entitled to as soon as he or she is born.” To have a birthright implies an obligation to live up to it.

In Saturday’s Los Angeles Times, the featured article in the “Beliefs” section was about a program known simply as “Birthright,” that sends young Jews to Israel so that they can come in contact with the place from which their faith, culture and integrity as a people was born. 75 % of the Jews who go are from the United States. Upon returning, people comment on the experience of feeling bonded to their ancestry and heritage, and of feeling a responsibility to live up to that heritage in how they live their lives as Jews with integrity. The word, “birthright,” once taken for granted, becomes more important.

What is your birthright? What is it that you were born in possession of, which presents itself to you now as the joy and responsibility it is? According to the story, Esau “despised” his birthright in how easily he gave it up. Like some people we might be acquainted with today, his focus was short and limited, and potential was therefore something that was rarely tapped. It might be that Esau did not look beyond his immediate needs to wonder about the potential he possessed simply by being born into his world, culture and family at the particular time he found himself. But Jacob knew.

Jacob may have been a schemer, but he wanted to take hold of life fully, from even the moment before he was born; grasping his brother’s heel in his attempt to emerge as quickly and wholly into the world as he could. Jacob was one of those unique people who could see clearly when many of us need reminding. Jacob was filled with a spirit that was alive and responsive to the world around him. In effect, this was a part of his birthright: to live up to his promise, his heritage—with integrity and responsibility. It may be something we need to be reminded of from time to time.

What are the gifts you are keeping inside you that could be let out, what is it that you are not sharing that could do someone a world of good? How are we responding to the word of hope, the message of love and the reminder that we are all connected to each other and to something greater, if not by living fully into our birthright as people of faith? Jacob believed in

the possibilities of life in the same manner as the man who once said, “I love the recklessness of faith—first you leap, and then you grow wings.”

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus climbs up into a boat by the seashore, and for the first time, he begins to speak in parables. These are short anecdotes whose meanings are often left open to interpretation—sometimes he tells us what he means, and other times he throws them out for us to think about. Often, they bring different meaning depending on the state of mind or time of life of the listener. They sound foreign to our ears, as we are trained to listen for facts and statistics.

“A sower went to sow some seeds.” The master-gardener throws far and wide—the seed will grow best in fresh soil that is watered and cared for. Life will spring up anywhere and within any soil that is receptive—the field is wide and diverse. The responsibility to respond to the call to life is yours.

UCC pastor and Professor Dr. Jeanyne Slettom, says, “The challenge in today’s texts is that they are essentially repeating the Deuteronomic imperative—to choose life. In its most literal meaning, that would be embodied life, here and now, “in the land which you enter and occupy” (Deut. 30:16). This is not a reference to some heavenly realm, but to the land of Israel, the place where one will grow up, marry, have children, plant fields, harvest, graze sheep, and eventually die. The problem is that for centuries Christians have understood so much through the lens of eschatology” (end-times).

The realm of God, as Jesus was teaching it, is in the here and now, and we are the hands that guide (or obstruct) it from coming into being.

Choose life. Grab onto it, follow it, live out your birthright. This is the underlying message not only in today’s passage, but in the crucial underpinning of all religious belief, as expressed to us in that Deuteronomic imperative. If there is anyone here who can join me in remembering what it felt (or feels) like to work and live below your full potential as a human being, then you both know and can feel the meaning of Thoreau’s words, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation....”

This is not the life for me. It is not the life for you, either, wherever you happen to be. Claim something bigger, take the risks, live life and let the roots take hold. Want something more and be willing to give something back in exchange for choosing life today.

And want it for the world as well. Birthrights are lost when tyrants starve their people and nations fire missiles meant to threaten. Birthrights are diminished when a great nation known for freedom and fairness defends torture abroad and denies healthcare at home. Want something greater for the place where our citizens will grow up, marry, have children, plant fields, harvest, graze sheep, and eventually claim another birthright. Claim it for yourself, and give it back in the responsibility you owe for the privilege of living in this “now,” this place, this place that Jesus calls the realm of God around us. It is yours, mine and ours together.

Scripture for Sunday, July 13, 2008, Proper 10 A

Genesis 25:21-34

21 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. **22** 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. **23** And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." **24** When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. **25** The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. **26** Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. **28** Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. **29** Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. **30** Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) **31** Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." **32** Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" **33** Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. **34** Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. **2** Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. **3** And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. **4** And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. **5** Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. **6** But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. **7** Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. **8** Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. **9** Let anyone with ears listen!"

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. **19** When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. **20** As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; **21** yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. **22** As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. **23** But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."