

Pastor's Message – 7/12/20  
Genesis 25:19-34

*"There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's. ..."*  
(You fill in the blank.)

Most people are able to fill in the blank, for such is the power of advertising. The so-called "Priceless" ads of a certain major credit-card company have been around for years. The format's simple: a short list of goods or services, each accompanied by their dollar value. Then there's a final item: something intangible, to which no financial value could possibly be assigned - something like a weekend spent camping with your kids. The value of this final item is a single word, weightily intoned by the announcer: "priceless."

It's a pretty slick campaign. It's made millions for the ad agency that created it (not to mention the credit-card company that commissioned the ads). One advertising executive handling the campaign admitted how slick it really is: "What really hit home with consumers," he said, "is that a company that is fundamentally all about money and paying for things would actually declare that the things that really count can't be bought."

So, there's a sly deception going on with the "Priceless" campaign. The ad people are so certain the deception works, they don't even need to be subtle about it. Deception is the framework for our Bible lesson for today.

The Book of Genesis, dealing as it does with relationships, contains some of the earthiest stories in the Bible. In Genesis, we see difficulties within families: between husband and wife, between wife and mistress and between brother and brother. The text confronts us with more challenges: parental favoring, sibling rivalry, and birthrights.

Beginning today, three themes are consistently interwoven: struggle, tricks, and promise. Even in the womb, today's story tells us, Jacob and Esau were struggling with each other, rivals to see who would be born first with all the birthright (promise) would entail in a culture built on who is born first. Jacob apparently gets his birth name (Ja'akov means "grabber") in part because he grabbed Esau's leg in the birth canal, seemingly in a last-ditch effort to be born first himself.

Esau was the first to be born, so by birthright, he was to inherit his father's estate; only moments later Jacob entered the world. Later, we see Jacob attempting to "grab" the birthright from his brother by means of another "trick," offering a meal of stew to his famished brother, fresh from the hunt, in exchange for it. Our story today recounts the sale of Esau's

birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup - the most expensive bowl of soup in recorded history.

In the case of Jacob and Esau, as the firstborn son, Esau was the rightful heir to Isaac's estate. Had it been his choice, Isaac probably would have given everything to Esau anyway because he preferred Esau over Jacob. They shared many common interests and skills. Jacob, who was a quiet homebody, was favored by his mother Rebekah.

The birthright was the special privilege given to the firstborn male of any patriarch. The birthright's economic value was, depending on the father's prosperity, often enough to set up the firstborn son for life. At his father's death, the eldest son received a "double portion" of the inheritance, or double what his brothers would get. The inheritance wasn't just economic, however (the currency in those days consisting largely of flocks, herds and slaves); it was also about leadership. Having the birthright meant exercising leadership over the family, replacing the father as the patriarch. The holder of the birthright made the decisions and ruled over his brothers, and the family line would be continued through him. In short, the birthright was designed to ensure the future of the family. Screw it up, and you screw up the family. Sell it, and you've sold away the future.

So the story goes that Esau comes in from hunting one day. He is hungry, so he asks Jacob for some of the stew he's been cooking. Jacob says, "Sure, I'll give you some of my stew in exchange for your birthright." Esau agrees. The deal is done. There you have it.

Esau, the favored son of his father, the athlete, the hunter, the firstborn son and projected future leader of the tribe, gives up everything for the momentary pleasure of filling his empty stomach. And the unfavored, non-athletic, quieter, but more wily son Jacob becomes, through his conniving, the heir of Israel.

The boys couldn't have been more different. The older son, Esau, we learn, would seem to have been the prototypical leader, given the description of him as red and hairy (read "very manly"). Jacob, who comes out of the womb holding onto Esau's heel, was quiet, soft, and interested in "living in tents" (read "with the women") rather than living in the field. As a result, Esau was clearly Dad's favorite, while Jacob was clearly a Mama's boy (vv. 26-27).

Rebekah, their mother, had already been wrestling with the turmoil between them in her womb when she "went to ask the Lord" about her pain of having twins. God told her that the two boys struggling within her would eventually come to embody the struggle between two nations (Israel and

Edom), and yet their roles would soon be reversed. "The one shall be stronger than the other," God said, "and the elder shall serve the younger" (v. 23).

Should Jacob be blamed here for duping his lummo of an older brother? The Bible doesn't make a value judgment on Jacob's actions at this point. Later, he will also cheat Esau out of Isaac's "blessing," which is essentially the patriarch's last will and testament and charge to his successor. Jacob, with Rebekah's help, thus deceptively, but in a legally binding way, seals the deal that was originally struck at the soup bowl (Genesis 27:30-40). Jacob seems to have sold his integrity to gain wealth and power. Both brothers are guilty of selling out in one way or another. The Bible tells us that Esau *despised* his birthright, but, by Jacob selling out his integrity, he also cheapens the privilege and the responsibility of being head of the family.

This story functions as the foundation for another trick, not covered in this Sunday's Bible reading: Rebekah enlisting Jacob to trick a blind and dying Isaac out of the birthright and blessing near the end of his days (Genesis 27-28). What are we to make of all the tricking going on? Are we to approve of it, since in the end it becomes a means by which Jacob ends up receiving the promise? Or are we to see deceit as part of God's ultimate plan for salvation through the twelve tribes of Israel all the way to Jesus: son of Joseph and son of David?

Does God sometimes call us to trick others to achieve some greater good? This isn't a theoretical question. It's a practical and experiential one. Are there situations where you have believed deceit was the better, if not entirely, the "morally upright" way forward? Have you ever told a "white lie" or hidden the truth to protect someone's feelings or to achieve a greater good?

Does this story indicate God finds all forms of deceit immoral and only lead to further struggles down the road? Does the story simply report deceit happened, again and again, but God found a way to accomplish God's promises anyway? Maybe, this story in the Book of Genesis isn't about the morality of Jacob's action, but the commitment of God to keep God's promises no matter what messes we put ourselves into?

Hear the story of Jacob and Esau for what it really means — as a wonderful testimony to God's hidden ways of challenging the world's ways in order to love and care for us. This is not the world's way of seeing Him. God does not operate with the world's ways. The world said Esau should be the heir of Isaac's line. The world says the rich and powerful are especially blessed by God. The power of God is more important than biology - more important than tradition.

God does not operate with the world's ways. The world would measure our value from who gets there first, who earned it by their works, and who thinks that God will reward us with material blessings if we are faithful.

The world says that later-born children like Jacob were not supposed to be heirs, and those disinherited like Esau are not supposed to get a second chance. The poor aren't supposed to matter, but they do matter. We do too. Jesus will later say, "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last (Matthew 20:16)." Jacob does not get the prize on his own strength, no matter how cunning he may be. It is God's prize to offer and God's prize to give. God gets it done, in the most wonderfully hidden, surprising ways!

Ultimately, as we continue to follow the story of this first family, we will learn that it was Jacob, not Esau, that God chose to be the bearer of the covenant for the next generation. Birthright laws or not, God chooses whom God will to do the work of the kingdom, and none of us would argue with that.

Sometimes God chooses an unlikely person; other times, it seems like a person was born for the job he or she has! Whether we see this particular example as an act of justice or patently unfair, let us give thanks that God does not choose workers on the same basis that humans do. God does not choose leaders based on birthright, or gender, or race, or skin color, or even the expected gifts.

God chooses on the basis of gifts given for service and ministry. No matter how many are here in the Church sanctuary today, no matter how many are participating in the worship service in another place at another time, all are equally called and needed for the building up of God's kingdom. Family leadership or Church leadership should not be built on deception or on personal power for personal gain but should rather be built on the design and desire of God to transform the lives of people and transform the world. It's not about what's in it for me, but about how we can serve others and meet the needs of others.

In the very real stories of the Bible, we can often see ourselves in one character or another or sometimes a little bit in all of them or see them in us. We sometimes use deception and selfish motivations in our dealings with people to get what we want instead of listening for and following God's plan. We are probably all like Esau and like Jacob, like Abraham and Sarah and Rebekah at one time or another. But, trusting faithfully in the wisdom and purpose and desires of God, God will work through us, and the Kingdom of Heaven draws ever closer.