

Romans 8:1-11 The Despised Birthright

The first Old Testament reading for this week comes from the Book of Genesis, chapter 25, and is the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau; and of the birthright Jacob purchased from Esau for a bowl of soup.

When we tell the story of Abraham and Sarah about the birth of their son Isaac, we always make sure to emphasize their old age and Sarah's barrenness. When it comes to Isaac and Rebecca, one generation later, the tendency is to skip over that detail which they share with Isaac's parents. Rebecca too was childless until through grace, the promise made to Abraham was extended to Isaac when Rebecca became pregnant and gave birth to twins.

Esau was the oldest and we are told that he was "red" all over, and he became a furry beast of a man's man. Jacob was the younger one, preferred by his mother, more calculating than masculine. Within the system of the rights of the firstborn, Esau was privileged, destined to inherit his father's estate.

One day, after an unsuccessful hunt, when Jacob had been in the kitchen all day making stew, Esau was hungry and demanded to be fed. Jacob saw his chance, set the table and welcomed his brother on one

condition; that condition was the birthright, the inheritance.

Esau's logic was like that of many of the cigarette smokers I have known personally, who when confronted with the medical facts that say that smoking is killing them, reply, "everyone dies of something," and go right on ahead with their smoking. Esau thought his birthright was going to be Jacob's anyway if he starved to death, and so he gave it up. The story ends with these words, "Esau despised his birthright."

The Condition

The focal text last week came from the remarkable 7th chapter of Romans in which Paul laments the inner dividedness that characterized his life, and quite frankly, our lives too. He writes of his desire and inability to do good, and the distress it caused.

Realistically, few thoughtful people have trouble relating to Paul's dilemma. One of the central features of human life is the moral demand that transcends society's norms and imposes itself upon everyone no matter their background, the time or place, the circumstances. It is part of what it means to be human.

One way to apprehend this facet of the human condition is transactional; the idea that health can be

achieved by meeting the moral demand, doing the good one has the opportunity to do, avoiding the evil.

Not to mention the futility of this very approach, common especially among religious people, this way of living fits the sociological category of the patron/client relationship. The patron sets the conditions of the deal, both sides attempt to keep up their end. Life is a business transaction.

People live this way! I am unqualified to attempt to the psychoanalysis necessary to ascertain the reason people approach relationships this way. It has its way of sense, but always leads to trouble because of the failure to keep up one's end of the deal. The Bible presents an alternative. Pay close attention to that alternative.

Family

The story of Jacob and Esau has elements of this business relationship but also exemplifies the alternative, that one's relationship with God is not a business transaction, but closer to a family encounter. There is no patron/client; seller/buyer, teacher/student, doctor/patient, employer/employee, or any of the rest, any other transactional relationship. Instead, it is more like that of parents with their children.

We have largely given up the "right of primogeniture" in our society. The American Revolution, God bless it, has equalized siblings in a way somewhat unforeseen until recent times. That system was in play in Israel's pre-history and gives us an analogy that is still meaningful. It is the family. That changes things.

Paul Speak

This analogy of family is familiar to all of us because one way or another we all live in families. It can help us to understand where Paul is going with his argument in the middle of Romans;

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He goes on to write at length about the law of the Spirit versus the law of sin and death. Though at first it may seem to be stretching things a bit, I am convinced that the family analogy can be pressed into service here, not to get ahead of ourselves to next week's reading in which Paul actually presses the service of this analogy by calling us "children, heirs,": the law of the Spirit *is* the law that regards the family. The law of sin and death *is* the law that regards those not in the family. I guess I did get ahead of things, but family *is* where Paul is going with this struggle.

Birthrights and inheritances are rich imagery and can be mined for all kinds of precious jewels of information about the human standing with the God of life and light.

For now, just dwell on the fact of it, that unlike a business relationship where one's benefit is founded on the ability to keep one's end of things, this benefit is based on a birthright. Life is a birthright. Love is a birthright. Forgiveness is an inheritance. Resurrection is an inheritance.

Dysfunctions

We all know about dysfunctional families because we are all in one, to a certain extent. Certainly, Abraham's family shows all the signs; favoritism, sibling rivalry, deceit. The tellers of these stories are not bothered by the disharmonies, what they see is that Esau had a place in this family and he traded it for next to nothing. He viewed it as a bargaining chip. He despised it.

We are God's family. The implications can be stated in general terms: goodness, honesty, love, forgiveness, fairness, empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, and the like. God treats us this way. We are meant to treat one another in the same way.

As long as we are in the family, we will desire these things and feel the weight of failure when we come up short. That is what it means to belong to Christ; the Spirit of Christ dwells in us.

The Despised Birthright

Let it not be said that we have despised our birthright! Let it be said that we have desired and sought that birthright. That means we never stop caring about this relationship. To stop caring is to treat it as something worthless, cheap; it is to reject the life, the love, the forgiveness that we have been given as an inheritance, We are told that such a person cannot please God.

We are not such people; weakened and controlled by the sinful nature. We have been given the Spirit within. Set your mind on what the Spirit desires, friendship, not hostility with God, resulting in life and peace.

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