

**Antiheroes: Jacob**  
**Genesis 27:1-40**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 19, 2016**

A father's blessing is a powerful thing. Children have chosen colleges & careers for a father's blessing often without even knowing it. They've given up dreams and hopes and even true loves in exchange for a father's blessing. The absence of a father's blessing can be devastating. Children hungering for that blessing have gone looking for it in hurtful places: from streets and men and things that can't compensate. Some have done horrible things hoping to earn that blessing. A father's blessing is a powerful thing. A father's blessing can be the soil for deep roots of a child's future. But some have withered and even died for lack of it.

So it doesn't surprise me that Jacob lies to his father's face to cheat his brother Esau out of the blessing that belongs to him. You can't get your father's blessing by playing by the rules, not if you are a second son. By law or culture or convention the first son gets the birthright, worth about 2/3 of the father's inheritance according to the rules recorded in Deuteronomy (21:15-17). The system is rigged as some of our presidential candidates would say. You can't play by the rules if you think you deserve your father's single blessing.

You've got to be more cunning, more intelligent, more calculating than your older brother. As a second son myself, that's what I always loved about this story. The second son, who by law or culture or convention is always second to his older brother, doesn't have to stay second fiddle. The second son who possess none of the traditional masculine virtues – qualities that his father appreciates and encourages in his older son; that second son is always one move ahead of his older brother in this chess game of blessing. Jacob wrests a blessing from his father with wit, cunning, and deceit – the only tools that can beat unfairness codified in law, custom, or culture.

When you're a younger son who's endured being tied to a tree by your older brother or chased on your bike at night by a car-full of your older brother and his friends after they exposed you to a horror film you were definitely too young to see, or punished multiple times for throwing the first punch when your brother got away with inciting it, then you love this story. But so does anyone – daughter or son, who's ever felt second fiddle, or ever found themselves outside the privilege of first born structures, or ever found themselves excluded by law, custom, or culture, those penultimate children who realized that the only way they would ever get a blessing from the fathers of this world is by tricking them out of it.

Esau and Isaac deserve getting tricked out of this blessing anyway. Isaac played favorites. What kind of a father plays favorites? Esau sells his birthright to Jacob one random day for a pot of stew.<sup>1</sup> What kind of a fool trades his inheritance

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 25:29-34. The birthright story is surprisingly short and seemingly of greater significance since it involves real property, as opposed to the much longer blessing story which involves "only"

for a pot of stew? Survival of the fittest should go to the one with the brains, not the brawn. Meritocracy rewards those who know what they want and are prepared to do what is necessary to get it by whatever Machiavellian means necessary.

But despite my second-son hope to make Jacob out to be the righteous one in this story, he's anything but that. He lies to his father. He conspires with his mother to cheat his brother. They destroy whatever hope of family unity there might have been. There's nobody in this story who is entirely innocent and nobody who is entirely guilty. There's nobody in this story who deserves to be blessed, neither by their father, nor by their God.

Which is troubling if you are a person who comes to church looking for a clear and simple moral example of how we're supposed to live. Jacob is the quintessential anti-hero long before Hollywood ever discovered the term, lying and stealing his way to birthright and the blessing.

We prefer narratives with simple, straightforward morality lessons. We want our heroes and our villains in clear categories so we can use those same categories to define the world and our place in it. It explains why only hours after the largest mass shooting in American history, there were already religious people leaving their anonymous Internet comments of hate announcing that gay people deserved to die. It explains why Trump was on the stump calling again for a blanket exclusion of all Muslims. We can't tolerate stories where people don't fall squarely into categories of deserving and non-deserving, blessing and curse, righteous and unrighteous.

There's a limit to blessings, after all, according to this story. Isaac's only got one blessing to give. There's not enough blessing to go to both sons much less to any other children. There's not enough blessing to lift both sons' spirits. There's not enough blessing to undergird both the son who hunts and the son who prefers to stay inside. There's not enough blessing for the hairy one and the one with smooth skin. There's not enough blessing for one with the stereotypical masculine qualities and the one with the stereotypically feminine ones. Not according to Isaac's family. Blessings are limited. Less for you means more for me. More for me means less for you.

That's the wisdom that's been passed down from Isaac's line – wisdom that we've adopted again and again in the church. There's not enough blessing for Christians and Jews, so we must be the blessed ones. There's not enough blessing for straight and gay – somebody has to be cursed. There's not enough blessing for Muslims and non-Muslims so somebody must be on the wrong side of God's favor. There's not enough blessing for people in north Baltimore and West Baltimore. There's not enough blessing for people who want to own a gun and people who want to keep them off the streets – only one group gets to be blessed. That's the so-called wisdom that the church and the culture seems on the brink of adopting – there's limited blessing – not enough to go around. Only one can win.

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words. The text does not bother to sort out the difference between birthright and blessing, but suggests that the blessing is of much greater significance in this culture of honor and shame. Perhaps the text would be "surprised" that our culture places a higher value on material wealth than on these kinds of spoken words of blessing and curse.

And if that's what God is trying to teach us, then I'm not sure which side of blessing I really want to be on. Jacob wins the birthright inheritance and the blessing, but look what happens to him. He's on the run for most of his life, running from his double-crossed brother who wants to kill him. His uncle gives him a taste of his own medicine and tricks him into working for 7 years to marry the daughter he doesn't want. He fights for a blessing from God in the night and walks away limping, wounded forever. There's a cost to that kind of winner takes all blessing – the perpetual anxiety that the ones you have beaten, the ones you have cursed, the ones you have held down, the ones you have tricked are always looking to do back to you what you've done to them. The accumulated stuff that you won at the expense of people closest to you; stuff you are constantly worried about losing. Always looking over your shoulder, suffocating in a cloud of paranoia that is fed by your fear of not enough. What kind of a blessing is that?

If God's blessings are limited, if there are not enough to go around, if only one kind of people, one kind of race or one kind of religion, or one nationality, or one kind of sexuality can win, then there will never be an end to our competitive, violent-filled quest to see God's limited favor. We'll always be chasing after blessings because there's not enough to go around to red and yellow black and white. There's not enough blessings to go around to straight and gay. There's not enough blessings to go around for Americans and Syrians and Iraqis and Iranians. There's not enough blessings for Muslims and Christians and Jews.

But I'm not so sure that's the way God really sees it even if Jacob does seem to win God's blessing. If it is true that Jacob wins not just his father's blessing but also the blessing of God, then God actively disrupts the system of blessing that privileged the firstborn.<sup>2</sup> God disrupted the blessing system established in the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy, a system seemingly authorized by God in the first place. And if God doesn't seem reluctant to alter that system of blessing over and against earlier biblical interpretation, why are we?

Maybe that's exactly what God wants us to see – the futility of accepting these systems of limited blessing where there's not enough blessing to go around. Esau asks the right question of his father, "Have you only one blessing, father?" but neither of them has the courage to even answer the question. Maybe that's the real problem with this family – the willingness by Isaac and Rebekah, by Esau and Jacob to accept the system of blessing that's been handed over to them as if God doesn't have enough blessing to go around.

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<sup>2</sup> While both the Jewish and Christian traditions clearly articulate the belief that Jacob (renamed Israel after encountering a mysterious God-figure later in the story) receives God's blessing over and against Esau (best summarized by the recurring biblical refrain "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"), the text itself is more ambiguous. God issues an oracle in Genesis 25:23 predicting Jacob's rise over Esau, but the oracle is worded as a prediction, not necessarily the result of God's action. God is silent through this story in Genesis 27. The Jewish faith continues to wrestle with the meaning and impact of "chosenness" while the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith wrestles with the doctrine of "election" and its impact on God's method and meaning of salvation. Both traditions will retain the centrality of this sense of chosenness as well as traditions that preserve God's ability and even willingness to disrupt those very same systems for God's purposes, often spurred by God's anger at injustice, or God's pathos toward human suffering.

Maybe that's the problem in our nation right now – a willingness to accept that in order for some to be blessed, others have to be cursed. The ancient doctrine of double predestination, clearly articulated by our Presbyterian tradition that since some must be eternally predestined for heaven then certainly that must mean others are destined for hell.<sup>3</sup> Some must be chosen and others rejected, played out in our national politics as if there's not enough blessing to go around.

We need a new system of blessing, one that is rooted in the conviction that God has enough blessing to go around. Today is Juneteenth, a worldwide celebration of the end of slavery in the United States. I'm ashamed to say that as a white man I didn't even know what the holiday was until a few years ago. I learned about the Emancipation Proclamation when on September 22, 1862 Abraham Lincoln declared all slaves free effective January 1, 1863. But slavery continued in Confederate controlled areas. Slaveholders migrated, many with their slaves into Texas to continue their old architecture of limited blessing. The war ended on May 9, 1865, but news of the end of the war took a long time to reach Texas and slavery continued until June 19, 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger walked out on a balcony in Galveston, Texas where he had just arrived with 2,000 troops to read General Order Number 3 – that all slaves were finally free. The system of limited blessing was starting to crumble.

So as we remember and grieve the loss of gay and lesbian brothers and sisters brought down by hate last week, and we remember a year later the senseless murders of black brothers and sisters in Charleston, let us not forget the many architectures of limited blessings that have been pulled down by people with courage to believe that our systems of limited blessing don't ever have to stay that way. God is more than willing to undo those systems of limited blessings.<sup>4</sup> Are we?

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<sup>3</sup> "Double predestination," clearly articulated by the Westminster Confession of Faith is one of several versions of the often misunderstood or misstated doctrine of predestination. When articulated accurately, it is the doctrine that reinforces the Reformed view that God's grace is more powerful than human sin, choice, or freedom. I can scarcely imagine any statement that contains better news than that. However, "double predestination" is a product of human rationality rather than biblical evidence, violating the Reformed belief that God is sovereign and able to choose whomever God wills and wishes, as well as the "character" of God that we come to know through Jesus who gives his life for the sake of the world. It is hard to imagine this God of mercy and forgiveness who enacts justice through self-giving love, selecting some for salvation and others for damnation.

<sup>4</sup> I made a conscious decision to stay within this text for this sermonic argument, however, I do believe that at the heart of the Christian faith stand the cross and resurrection which could be understood as God's central act of unveiling and ultimately overcoming the human architecture of limited blessings.