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## Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis

### V. "A Mess of Pottage" – An Independence Day Reflection

Genesis 25:19-34 19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, 20 and Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean. 21 And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 The children contended with one another within her; and she said, "If it is going to be this way, why would I want to 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 days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" 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 pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau renounced and sold his birthright.

I can only imagine that whenever the boy Esau brought home his report card that while he may have gotten good grades in the ancient middle eastern equivalent of gym class or hunting and fishing, same report card probably often said that he had trouble with "impulse control"! It would appear from today's story that poor Esau was also not terribly smart – because a moment's not particularly difficult thought would make it pretty obvious that exchanging his birthright, his right as the first-born son in that era and that culture to have 2/3 of the inheritance when his father died, for a bowl of beans – which is what "pottage" is – is not a very good deal. Of course, Jacob here is no paragon either, for he's actively manipulative and conniving. He knows his brother has

trouble controlling his mouth and his impulses; he knows his brother doesn't do delayed gratification very well, and still he makes this ridiculous offer to trade him one meal of beans for his entire future (reminds me of when I was a child that I used to trade my little brother my nickels for his dimes, because I told him that the nickels were bigger and therefore nicer to have). And Esau, good-hearted, simple-minded Esau with his problem with impulse control and delayed gratification, and his apparent inability to think about the consequences of his actions, takes Jacob's deal and thereby irrevocably damages his future for him and his descendants utterly and forever.

Welcome to generation three of this family, what someone once called "history's first dysfunctional family." How do we get to today's story? Well, you will recall that Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah, the first generation of what came to be identified as the Hebrew people. They had followed God's call to move to a new land and they had heeded, although not without some struggle and some disbelief, God's promise that they would have a son, even in their old age. Isaac is that son and, to make a long story short, he grows up and marries Rebecca. And that is where we pick up the story for today, where Rebecca has two twin sons, Esau and Jacob. But that pregnancy about drove her crazy; did you hear it? *"The children contended with one another within her; and she said, 'If it is going to be this way, why would I want to live?'"* In fact, these two who are already struggling in the womb will turn out to be at odds with each other from then on out, always contending and fighting with one another for everything. And even though they are twins, they don't look or act anything alike: Esau red-complected, with much red hair, and Jacob is fair-skinned, with very little hair. Esau the hunter – ranging the fields and bringing back all kinds of wild game and enjoying cooking it for his father – and Jacob the kid who stayed at home in the family tent, reading and brooding and thinking and planning. These two had even contended at the very moment of birth: Esau arrived first, but just barely; not a minute later Jacob is born

holding on to Esau's heel.

Have you heard that old saying, "*He sold his birthright for a mess of pottage?*" Today's story is where that saying comes from. It means to trade away or give up something that is very, very important for something that's not important at all, to trade away the essential in favor of the trivial. And it also often means that in doing so, what is given up is gone forever, and what is gained is fleeting and insubstantial. "*A mess of pottage.*" And sometimes it's not just a dumb thing to do, but a *terrible* thing to do. That was the case for Esau: his life was forever changed by trading away 2/3 of his inheritance – his share of the estate as the first-born – in that pottage moment to become instead simply one of the *many* heirs of Isaac, lumped in with all the other members of the household for a small share of his father's estate. And so, instead of having the resources to carry on the family business, to become a successful rancher and farmer like his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, he ends up having to leave and seek his fortune elsewhere because the family ranch, the family farm couldn't support him. And while we may think misguided or unfair the Hebrew custom of the day that 2/3 of the inheritance went to the first son, it was nonetheless the way things were done in order to keep the land and wealth consolidated through the generations and Esau knew it – and yet he traded away that substantial inheritance for a full belly of beans that would last a few hours. "*A mess of pottage.*"

But let's not be **too** hasty to judge Esau here – because he is us, sometimes, isn't he? Sometimes haven't you or I traded away something of great worth for a fleeting satisfaction or pleasure – and sometimes that pleasure turned out to be not even that pleasurable!?! I mean:

Have you ever said something to another person and even as the words were coming out of your mouth you knew that they might feel good – for a moment – but that

they would in fact never be able to be taken back and would bruise someone, strain a relationship forever? *A mess of pottage....*

Or, have you ever just had to have the last word – just had to! – and *that* word was the word that escalated things far beyond what they ever needed to be, and which would make healing and reconciliation a long time in coming? *A mess of pottage...*

Have you ever said “no” when you could have just have easily, at no cost to yourself, said “yes”? And a “yes” would have made life so much more joyful for someone? *A mess of pottage....*

Have you ever stood by while a mean or racist or homophobic or religious joke was told in your presence and instead of calling the person on it – or even just not joining in the laughter – you said nothing – not even later privately – or you went ahead and laughed because it was easier than not laughing? *A mess of pottage....*

I know that I have done all of those things and sometimes traded something truly important for something fleeting and cheap; I have sometimes gone for short-term safety rather than long-term possibility; I have sometimes let my words come too quickly when I should have kept my mouth shut, or sometimes I have kept my mouth shut to buy peace but it was a peace bought at someone else’s expense and I should have spoken up instead of standing mute. *A mess of pottage.*

Let me shift direction here a bit. The stories of these families from the Book of Genesis, our “first families in faith,” are the stories that will lead to the creation of the people, the nation, of Israel. These folks we are studying the summer will become the examples of ways to behave or not to behave. They will become part of the Hebrew nation’s story as it develops over the coming centuries from a wandering band of Abraham and his kin to a nation, headquartered in Jerusalem, with a king, and a law and all the things that nations have. And, as nations sometimes will, in the centuries to

come the Hebrew nation will sometimes lose its way and will need to be called back by the prophets – Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the rest. But there is a sense in which every single prophetic word that later comes to the Hebrew people when it is needed is always rooted in the lesson learned from Esau’s awful trade: ***Don’t ever give up what is truly important for a mess of pottage.*** Don’t give up the emphasis on justice to the widow and orphan; don’t trade that away. Don’t give up the Godly virtue of hospitality for everyone for the allures of xenophobia, being suspicious of outsiders. Don’t ever forget that every human being is a child of God; don’t trade that away.

And on this weekend when we celebrate our nation’s birth, I look back on our history as a people, as a nation, and remember that the truly marvelous thing about the United States, the truly unique thing, is that we are a country founded not on ethnicity or language or kinship or region or class or caste but on a set of **ideas**: that all human beings are created equal and are to be given equal rights under the law, and that all are to be free. That is the furthest thing from a mess of pottage that there could be! Now, you and I are aware that we as a nation haven’t always lived up to that ideal. Yet I still read President Lincoln’s words from his second inaugural address and get goose bumps:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

*“With malice towards none....”* What an amazing thing to say in March of 1865. But I am sadly aware that after Lincoln’s assassination that grand, healing, reconciling Godly vision was traded away for the nasty pottage of Jim Crow laws and the denial of voting rights to Black folks, and denial of the right to own property to those of Chinese and Japanese descent, and a climate of hatred that made lynchings a public after-church sport in too many places, and sacrificed too many children on a pernicious and false

doctrine that separate schools could ever possibly be equal ones. *A mess of pottage....*

And this morning, my friends, I fear that the temptation to go for the pottage too often pervades our national life today. It would never be my place to tell you who to vote for and what your political views should be, but I do hope that you'll join me in trying mightily to reject the mess of pottage that is too often the media's insistence that everything about political life can be reduced to a simplistic fight that disrespects your intelligence and mine. Too often the media merrily sucks down the swill of the pottage of character assassination, preferring to fixate on the ephemeral and the fleeting and the trivial, instead of focusing respectfully – even when there is disagreement – on what Dr. King called “the content of a man’s character.” The pottage that is set before us every day is the swill of assuming the worst about those with whom we disagree politically, of demonizing them; it is the polluted potion of ridicule instead of civility and each and every day too much of our culture and our media asks you and me to lap it up.

One of the terrifying lessons to be learned from *Esau's* story is that some choices and decisions bring consequences that *cannot ever be undone*. But on this Independence Day weekend, the good news for our country is that not only is America founded on a powerful and moral set of ideas, those ideas are also ***self-correcting***; that is, they carry within themselves the possibility of becoming ever more true even when they have not been as true as they should have been. I think of the hatred toward the Germans in World War II, and I think of the way our nation turned away from the pottage of revenge and instituted the Marshall Plan – that quite literally saved hundreds of thousands of lives all across Europe. “*With malice towards none....*” I think of the way that two years later, when the Soviet Union blockaded and besieged Berlin, the United States organized the most massive movement of food the world has

ever seen in an airlift that, again, kept people from literally starving. *“With malice towards none...”* I think of the way that both Presidents Reagan and Clinton recognized that the ideas of freedom and equality had been misplaced amidst the pottage when they apologized to the Japanese-Americans for the internments of World War II, and to the Hawaiian people for the seizure of their land – for not living up to those ideas that make us who we are at our best.

Ten year ago tonight, Barbara and I and our youngest daughter were in Ely, Nevada. If you’ve been to Ely, you know it is a hard-scrabble place, set amidst a desolate landscape, hours from the next real town. That night we found ourselves at the country fairgrounds, sitting on the hood of our car, parked there with hundreds of others to watch the fireworks light up the desert sky. On one side of us was parked a young Hispanic American mother and her three small children. As the fireworks burst over our heads, those children with excitement and glee waved the tiny American flags they had clutched in their hands and shouted “¡Mira! ¡Mira!” Look! Look! Parked on the other side of us was a family of Laotian American, Hmong refugees I’m guessing, who were sharing a meal of hotdogs and french fries and who also were captivated with the incandescent tribute to freedom bursting over our heads. In front of us was a family of Japanese-American folks, whose grandparents, we learned had been interned by their country not that far from where we all sat that night, and they too shouted with excitement at each enormous explosion. And parked behind us was a Muslim American family, outfitted in beautiful robes and whose children had little American flag stickers on their chests. And we – Scots-Irish and German descendants – got lumps in our throats and I remembered why I care so much for this country – because when we are at our best, we do indeed say no thank you to the pottage of hatred that gets placed before us and we do instead seek to make even more real, even more true, our commitment to welcome everyone, with “malice toward none, with charity towards all,”

seeking to live out those words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty about welcoming all those who yearn to be free.

The tragedy of Esau is that his choice was irrevocable and the consequences unchangeable. But, my friends, the good news this morning for you and me as individuals, and for our nation, is that the grace of God offers us transformation in every moment. The grace of God offers us the courage not to eat from that bowl of pottage but instead to reach for the right thing, the best thing, that will truly nourish now and into the future. The grace of God will allow us always – if we will but believe and act – to correct what needs correcting and make possible what had seemed could never be. And isn't that better than a mess of pottage?