

Sermon – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 10A)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *God's favor is not something that must be earned or maintained; rather, when God chooses or favors some, it is to multiply blessings that they might be shared with all God's beloved creatures.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Something is wrong in this family
 - a. Middle Eastern hospitality
 - i. My experiences, especially in Jordan
 - ii. Hospitality is a major value throughout the Middle East (perhaps shaped by the challenges of life in desert climes).
 - iii. This concern for hospitality is also seen in Scriptural stories
 - b. Jacob's shocking failure of hospitality shows that something is very wrong.
 - i. Esau's need – commentators note that he probably isn't exaggerating when he says he is about to die. Especially as a hunter, food scarcity was a reality.
 - ii. Jacob's extortion – hospitality demands that Jacob should be quick to provide for Esau, and their familial bond reinforces that expectation. Instead, Jacob sees an opportunity to get ahead.
 - iii. Jacob's name means "heel grabber", and this is more than just a cute reference to how he was born. It speaks to Jacob being one who grasps at what isn't his, to his being a trickster who is willing to fight dirty to get ahead. It could be translated as "supplanter / usurper". It isn't a flattering name!
 - c. Sibling Warfare
 - i. Things have been off even since before birth – the word for the brothers' "struggling" in the womb is better translated as "smashing" (no wonder Rebekah wasn't having it!).
 - ii. It is significant that Jacob is predicted to be the stronger, and that "the elder shall serve the younger". In the culture of the time, the first born (male) was a place of undisputed privilege and primacy. The birth right is the language for those privileges – most specifically for the right to twice as much of an inheritance as any other child. It is shocking for Jacob to demand this!
 - iii. And, it is an indictment on his character that Jacob isn't satisfied even with this...as we will discuss further next week, Jacob will go on to further usurp Esau by taking advantage of Isaac as he is old, blind, and dying.
 - iv. This text makes abundantly clear that something is deeply wrong in this family!
2. The danger of playing favorites
 - a. Isaac and Rebekah's favoritism

- i. As if the prophetic word from God were not enough to drive a wedge between Jacob and Esau, the text tells us that their parents also played favorites.
 - ii. Establishing a generational pattern – Jacob will play favorites with his wives and then his sons, leading his sons to turn murderous against the favored Joseph.
 - b. God seems to play favorites as well
 - i. The prophecy to Rebekah in this passage favors Jacob over Esau, despite him being the younger son.
 - ii. Moreover, if we cast a wider look at Scripture, there is a famous line from the prophetic book Malachi (last in the Bible) in which God declares: “Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated...”
 - iii. These are difficult words, leaving many of with a sense of insecurity. Why would God favor some over others? And how do we ensure that we are among the favored?
 - c. Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that so many of us seem to live with a sense of insecurity.
 - i. This seems to be part of the human psyche: a drive to prove ourselves, to stand out, to self-promote, and to shine brighter than anyone around us.
 - ii. Of course, like the favoritism shown by Isaac and Rebekah, and the rivalry seen between Jacob and Esau, this human impulse so often leads not to good, but to suffering for all involved.
 - iii. So, surely, this can’t be what God wants us to take from today’s text!
- 3. The Spirit of Christ
 - a. Reexamine this text
 - i. The text shows surprising amount of sympathy toward Esau. It speaks of his talent, and of Isaac’s love for him. It does not malign him at all; our translation speaks to Esau despising his birth right, which can too easily be read as an indictment of Esau, as if he was an ungrateful boar who deserved what he got. But that doesn’t actually fit with text – there is a sequence of verbs in the Hebrew that makes it clear that Esau despises his birth right because of what happens in this story; Jacob’s dirty tactics leave Esau rightfully bitter and angry.
 - ii. Etiological aspect of the text: the brothers end up fathering different and opposing nations. Esau is the father of Edom, while Jacob is the father of Israel. To some extent, this text is meant to explain the rivalry between these nations – and the fault is put on Jacob, not Esau! This text is not playing along with the “we hate Edomites” agenda of many Israelites at the time that Genesis would have been compiled and written down.
 - iii. Introduction to Jacob – in all his messiness! This is not a celebration of favoritism; if anything, it is a critique of it!
 - b. Mind of flesh is death / Mind of the Spirit is life and peace
 - i. God’s perspective on this text, and on the concept of divine favoritism, is further illuminated by our reading from Romans. Paul speaks here of the contrast between a mind set on the flesh and a mind set on the Spirit. This is not a body / mind contrast (as if the body is bad and the mind is good). Rather, the word translated as “flesh” speaks to human weakness and limitation – about our propensity toward insecurity and our need to jockey for position and privilege and favor.

- ii. In contrast, we are called in this Romans passage to live according to the Spirit of God. And, as other passages further explain, the way of the Spirit is the way of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.
 - iii. We are called not to be tricksters and usurpers, but to be rooted in God's overabundance of love and favor for all of creation – to the Spirit of life and peace.
- c. Divine favor is never earned
 - i. We are each given gifts, and are meant to live into them! Some may stand out more than others – just like the good seeds in Jesus' parable bear a variety of yields. But that is not a sign of greater favor or love, because God's love is not based on our accomplishments or skills; it is based on God's character as the loving creator, and our being beloved creatures (as the Ash Wednesday collect says, God hates nothing that God has made!).
 - ii. AND, loving us each immeasurably, God delights to mess with our rankings and systems, often choosing to work through the lesser and imperfect and unexpected! God so often chooses to work through the youngest or the weakest or the flawed characters, which should be a reminder that it is never really about our skills and abilities.
 - iii. This is borne out in Jacob and Esau's story. While Jacob's dirty tricks eventually lead to a collapse of their relationship, as we will explore further next week, the story doesn't end there. Rather, Jacob ultimately returns to his brother in contrition and humility, ready to make things right. The one who was the supplanter become the one through whom Esau and his descendants are blessed and provided for.
- d. Multiplication of blessings – and our call (as individuals, a community, and a nation)
 - i. The good news of this passage is that God does sometimes choose and bless and favor some people over others, but that blessing never stops with the chosen ones. Rather, it is multiplied through them that it might go out and bless all of God's beloved creatures.
 - ii. If you're someone who has felt overlooked or unfavored or usurped – the good news is that you also are beloved by God, and this is not the end of your story. You will not be allowed to languish forever!
 - iii. But many of us are marked much more by blessing and favor. This is especially true of the community of Gloria Dei, and of the American nation. Today's texts make clear that there is not room in the kingdom of God and in the life of God's spirit for us to bask in that favor and blessing while neglecting those in need around us. To put it even more blatantly, there is no space for an "America first" agenda here!
 - iv. Rather, we are called to recognize our blessings, and to use them on behalf of others. And this is good news for us as well! It means that we need not live in insecurity, worrying that we might lose God's favor – because it is not based on our efforts anyway! Rather, than self promotion and striving and dirty tricks, we are called to the Spirit of life and peace. As Paul concludes: *If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, then God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies also through God's Spirit that dwells in us.*

Amen.

Notes:

- Question of God's favor – why some rather than others?
- Apparently a Sermon Brainwave commentary notes that the Israelite people would have expected an explanation and justification for hating Edomites (? – the descendants of Esau). Instead, this gives some grace for understanding Esau and owning that Jacob (and his descendants!) bear some fault for the messy relationship.
- Perhaps use *The Incredibles*? The move to make everyone special so that no one is special, or to deny / suppress special giftings, is not actually helpful, nor is it God's intent. Rather, God does somewhat play favorites, but it always leads to good for the whole.
- "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated" gets quoted, not least by Paul in Romans. But, it is so often misunderstood or wrong conclusions are drawn! As Barth points out, Jacob does eventually come back and reconcile with Esau, bringing him gifts and blessings!