Pastor Adrianne Meier
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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

The Journey of the Triumphant Younger Son; *or* the Overthrown Older Brother Whose Life Goes On

Genesis 25:19-34
These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"

So she went to inquire of the Lord. 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." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel, so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me
your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. If you have ears, hear!"

It seems like every morning, as I read the news, there is, inevitably, a headline that mentions Christianity. And what it is described is a faith that looks nothing like the one I practice. I read about Christian nationalism as if this is how all Christians feel about our country, about government. I read about "family values" that define families in a way that looks little like my own and absolutely excludes the families and lives of people I love very much. Complex issues are a reduced to a "the Bible says" black and white understanding that misses the point entirely, reduces the Bible to a checklist, and also leaves out huge swaths of Scripture that contradict or confuse the point. And most of the time, these same people can't even say where the Bible says that! I feel like Esau, like I've been tricked out my birthright. I've been tricked out of my baptismal right as a Christian by those who claim to be Christian but seem to care little about justice, about the care of and the blessing of those who are poor or marginalized. Tell me I'm not alone in this, Church. Yet, the blessings of God do not come from the hands of the powerful, they do not come at their direction, but fall from God's hand bountifully on us all.

I remember the first time I heard this story—Jacob and Esau. Growing up, my folks would drop me off in the morning at a daycare at the First Church of the Nazarene. And every morning, a volunteer from the church would come in and she'd set up her green, pilling felt board and tell a Bible story. Now, we didn't have felt boards at Trinity Lutheran Church, so I found this very intriguing. I think the feeling was mutual—one time they asked me to pray and 8- or 9-year-old me prayed the Apostle's Creed, which wasn't, apparently, common in their worship, and proves I was "church nerd level: high" from a very early age.

Anyway, the volunteer put up the felt Jacob: handsome, slender, with sleek hair. This was the 90s, think Jonathan Taylor Thomas, or Hanson, like the long hair, moody face. Then she put up the felt Esau, who was basically Sasquatch. And as the volunteer told this story, every elaboration served to show how smart Jacob was, how faithful, how God-like; and how stupid and simple-minded Esau was.

Of course, in this story, nobody really looks very good. Jacob is the trickster, and Esau is, well, kind of dense. Though, I hate the idea that we pin that on Esau—as if exaggeration is some miraculous modern intervention. Surely my younger sister and I have traded whatever birthrights we have over and over again with exaggerations about being starving or over some petty thing that is clearly and patently *so unfair*.

So then, the volunteer would tell today's story along with the next story in Genesis, where the aged Isaac is ready to bless his eldest—and favorite—son, but Rebekah and Jacob cook up a scheme—do you see what I did there? They come up with a plan involving a tasty meal and a wooly-dress up outfit and they steal Isaac's blessing from Esau, too. And then the volunteer would emphasize Esau's rage and the rush of Jacob's fleeing.

And then, she'd take Esau's felt figure off the board and put him away for the year, because we wouldn't need him anymore. This had been a story about Jacob, after all, just setting us up for his dreams, his family drama.

The way we tell these stories matters. Told in this way, the story tells us that we are keepers of God's blessing. That we are its stewards and its guardians. We must be like Jacob: we must seize the blessing. We must control it, keeping it for ourselves because there is not enough to go around. Told this way, the story says, Isaac had two sons, but only enough blessing for one. But look at what that did to this family! The rivalry of the twins, unchecked by or even fed by their parents…it eventually tears the family apart.

But this is often how we have inherited this story. Those of us entrusted with the Western Christian tradition have to admit that we have treated God's blessings as something to be taken, seized, stolen at any cost. Under the guise of Christianity and in the name of God's blessings, we have enslaved people—people created in God's image; we have stolen land, plundered treasure, pillaged entire cultures. When I lament what I think is being taken from me today by those who claim to speak for all Christians, I must—I absolutely must—remember that I've inherited a tradition that has taken just as much—or, really, so much more—from others.

But God's blessings are not a finite resource. God's blessings are like seeds sown by a foolish farmer—wasting them on the path, on the rocks, among the thorns. And yet, to God, none of them are wasted: for they feed the birds, amend poor soil, and nourish native seed.

Esau's story doesn't end when Jacob runs away, even if theTcamera only follows Jacob's movements. We may see Jacob fleeing to Haran at his mother's instructions, where Abraham's story had begun, and where his mother, Rebekah was from. We know of his journey back toward his family. And we know of the night he wrestled with God, his sleep surely disturbed because of who he would meet in the morning: his brother Esau, for the first time since Jacob had tricked him out of their father's blessing. That night, Jacob had sent half the livestock and people with him across the river, so that, if Esau was still murderous, Jacob could, maybe, still escape. But the next morning, when Jacob crossed the river and met his brother, things are completely different than he imagined. Esau ran to him, embraced him, wept over him. And Jacob says to him, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

In Jacob's absence—and the narrator's, for that matter—Esau prospered. Out of the frame, *Esau* continued the work begun in Abraham and Isaac, caring for the land, raising up a strong family. Interestingly, Abraham was a herdsman, like his family in Haran, and Jacob, on growing to adulthood there also became a herdsman, a shepherd. But Isaac had prospered in farming, and since Esau remained with him, I wonder if Esau, too, became a sower of seed.

Scripture shows how the blessing passes from Abraham to Isaac, from Isaac to Jacob, and so it is easy to assume that that is the only way of blessing: from patriarch to patriarch, from power to power. But if the story of the triumph of the younger son—by hook or by crook—is the story that says that God's blessings don't move in the usual way, then the story of the coup-ed older son whose life still goes on remains a story that absolutely underscores that abundance of God's blessing isn't given by the powerful, but falls abundantly on us all. That blessings of God aren't meant to be taken, but shared. Next week, we will hear what happens when Jacob is finally—and truly—blessed by God. God will reiterate the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac, of "offspring like the dust of the earth," and this, the heart of the blessing, that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you."

Beloved, yes, we have taken the blessings of God that were not for us. Yes, sometimes it seems the blessings that are for us have been taken by trickery, if not by force. Too often the narrative follows those who plunder and pillage and steal their way to infamy. But, often unseen, the blessings of God still fall like seed on fertile soil, multiplying in us so that they may be shared, replanted, and cast about again and again to the glory of God's name and the blessing of the whole world in Jesus's name. Amen.