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Alexandria, Virginia 22310
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Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23
Genesis 25:19–34

THE ESAU IN US

I rarely tell you very much about myself. I always think it's self-indulgent, and after all, we are people of the Book and we should be talking about God's work. But I would like to share with you that I am the youngest child in my family. My parents were very capable and I considered them quite intelligent people. In their own way, each of them put their stamp on my heart and they gave meaning to my childhood. Their adult lives had an impact on my formation.

My father eventually was his own boss. He owned his own business—a manufacturing concern. And after he was clear that his business was going to make it, my mother went to him and asked if she could go back to school. She had become a grandmother, but she had always wanted a college degree. And so before she turned 50, she went to college and eventually earned her Master's, something she was very proud of. All this time, it was clear that I was the family favorite. There were 12 years between my oldest sister and me. When I was in elementary school, my mother talked to my dad into letting her continue her dream of higher education. She had, after all, been their high school valedictorian. "Letting her"—that was a different time, wasn't it? I am sure, with the right mixture of persistence and guilt, dad would have pretty much agreed to whatever mom wanted.

But my family was made up of heroes—heroes of overcoming their circumstances. At least, that is what I understood from all the stories. By the time I was in middle school (back then we called it junior high), I was well on my way to pursuing my own status as a family hero. After all, my family was in need at that time. My dad had been diagnosed with cancer before I became a teenager. Years of not understanding himself led my parents to split up, and eventually they were divorced—a fact which I told no one. My father had been diagnosed, as I say, with cancer and after their divorce, not very long at all, he died. And then the family business, which had significantly contributed to the lifestyle of my mother and all five children, went out of our possession and became the property of my father's second wife, to whom my father had been married a total of six months. Twenty-seven years of marriage vs. six months. It didn't make sense. It still doesn't make sense.

I had experienced a lot by the time I was fifteen. I had, in many ways, life experience that transcended that of most of the adults I knew. My early attempts at being a champion of my circumstances had changed me. I was still the favorite! It was just different as an adult.

And I am telling you this story—my story—because we read this morning part of our family story. Jacob is our relative. Spiritually, if not literally, the deceiver, the grabber,

the weaker, with all his cleverness and all his guile, this member of our family prevailed over another member of our family, the guy we call Big Red. And Jacob's friends knew this was the family story. They were forever teasing him as the trickster, the opportunist.

So there it is, our family tree, skeletons and all—the parts we would like to keep hidden, the parts we were at times ashamed of. It's a well-known story and it drives home the message that God's promises are not dependent on our being heroes, not dependent on any sense of perfection, and in an ultimate sense, not even dependent on our faithful responses. God's word and God's promises prevail in spite of us. You see, God will make good on God's word. God will give our life meaning and purpose despite our flawed stories. God will act even when we get it wrong. And all too often, we don't even admit what we don't understand about God's grace and goodness—God's truth. Look back at Genesis, verse 34. It says that Jacob gave, and that Esau ate and drank and rose and went his way and eventually despised his birthright.

It's easy, isn't it, to despise our birthright? It's easy to act like a wannabe disciple, believer, like Jacob. It's easy to be melodramatic about our circumstances, or our self-imposed unhappiness. It's easy to despise the opportunistic actions of others and to forget that God's promises are powerful. When Rebekah went to inquire about her pregnancy, God had already told her how his purpose would play out. She must have told Jacob that story—retold it time and again in the tent while they were cooking together. But Jacob just couldn't trust God. He had to do it himself.

Sound familiar? We know God has given us salvation—a free gift which we could never have earned—and yet we still try to prove that we are the hero. And we insist, like Jacob, on redoing what God has already done. Or, like Esau, we resent being the first-born, with responsibilities, one of God's children who has been called on to serve, to lead, to give. It's like one day we realize, okay, now I understand, this is how I am supposed to live, in a forgiving, understanding, patient way. My response to grace is individual, but it is clearly a response that God has inspired. And after we have that realization, we are not so happy with the implication. Yes, we too have a birthright, but sometimes the one who is weaker causes us to misstep. And isn't it a reality that the greater our blessings become, the harder time we have being faithful? And when we try, somehow it turns sour and we begin to despise that faithfulness we recognized when we had less—less faith, fewer friends, less responsibility.

Genesis and Esau, Jacob and us, we are all in the beginning of a story that God is still writing. And God is still choosing us so that we might be a blessing. Esau and Jacob looked at that invitation from God and the first thing they said was, "What about me? What about what I want? What about where I want to go and what I want to do?" And God's response was constant, it was unwavering. God said to them: "I will bless you and you will be a blessing." Maybe Emerson helps us here: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man, no one, can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." "I will bless you," God says, "and you will become a blessing." Let us not be tempted as we bless others to despise our birthright. It is, after, all, a gift from our Father. How will we respond? Amen.