

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible
Part 3: Birthright Full of Beans

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Scripture: Genesis 25:24-34; Hebrews 12:14-16

As some of you know, in ancient times names were not chosen for children merely because they happened to sound good to their parents. Parents named their children based on a hope or intuition of what that child's life would be about. Thus, for instance, the name Joshua literally means "Yahweh is salvation." You know who the most famous person named Joshua in history was, don't you? The Greek version of the name Joshua is Jesus.

When you read a biblical story, therefore, it's often helpful to pay attention to people's names, as they often add meaning and nuance to the action. In our story this morning, for instance, Isaac and Rebekah name the first of their twin children "Esau," which means "rough" or "hairy." Ostensibly, he is so named because he came out of the womb this way, but we also know from the story that Esau had a rough and more animal-like character, being more concerned about meeting his immediate needs than future ones.

The son who followed Esau was named "Jacob," which is derived from the Hebrew word for "heel." Again, the name is both a literal and an intuitive reference. Jacob was literally pulled from his mother's womb while grabbing his brother's heel. Yet Jacob would also be "grabbing the heel" of many people throughout his life for his own gain, like when he grabbed "Rough and Hairy's" birthright as the firstborn son in exchange for a mere bowl of bean stew.

In biblical times, the firstborn son would inherit a double-portion of the family estate, so the trade hardly seems fair. Jacob's taking advantage of Esau's extreme hunger by offering him bean stew for his birthright seems unusually cruel and unjust to our modern sensibilities. Yet if Jacob were here this morning, he would probably argue that it is just as cruel and unjust to assign a double portion of the family inheritance to a child simply because he was born a few seconds before his twin brother! If Esau thought so little of his birthright advantage that he was willing to trade it for a bowl of beans, then he got what he deserved.

The author of the story clearly seems to side with Jacob in this matter – probably because the author also sees the bigger picture: Jacob's nature as one who grabs

blessings by another's heels would eventually lead him to grab an angel in a famous all-night wrestling match and not let go until the angel agreed to bless him. The angel complied, renaming Jacob Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God (and prevails)." Through this blessing, Jacob – now Israel – would become the father of a nation by his own name. His twelve sons would become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. As Rabbi Aryeh Azriel would say, they have been wrestling with God ever since!

The story of Jacob and Esau not only has significance for the Jewish people, but for us as well. As a story rich in the Bible's mythological imagination, Jacob's deal with Esau teaches us an important lesson that has less to do with history than it does with circumstances human beings have faced over and over again, up to our present day. The lesson is this: **If you are given something precious, treat it that way or it may very well slip through your fingers.**

In this respect, I'm reminded of Harry Chapin's famous song, "Cat's in the Cradle," in which a father who continually privileges his work responsibilities over his relationship with his son. His son doesn't let lack of attention get in the way of his continual vow that sometime, "I'm gonna be like you, dad, you know I'm gonna be like you." When the child grows up his father realizes that his son has indeed become just like him, privileging everything else over his relationship with his father.

The story of Jacob and Esau actually takes this lesson one step further than Chapin's song. In failing to appreciate the value of his birthright, Esau's blessing **not only slips from his fingers, but the blessing falls into the hands of someone who recognizes the true value of it, and treats it as valuable.** I wonder what Esau would think today about his trade, seeing in hindsight that, in swapping his birthright, the whole history of the Israelite people would center itself around Jacob, not Esau, and that the Messiah himself would come from Jacob's line, not Esau's. If he were present this morning, my guess is that his advice would be, **"Count your blessings! Don't trade them away for lesser things, especially if those blessings come from God."**

We do it all the time, of course. That's why these biblical lessons continue to be so helpful to read and re-read. By keeping them current in our imagination, we might just hold on to a few more blessings we would otherwise have let go of. You do read your Bible regularly, don't you? Or have you become like most of our society, trading time spent with the Scriptures for the "bean stew" of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* on television?

I see quite a lot more blessing-for-stew trading these days among Christians than I ever imagined possible. Whether one self-identifies as a “conservative” Christian or a “liberal” one, both children of the Christian inheritance seem to have utterly forgotten, and forsaken, their birthright.

Take, for instance, the blessing of receiving God’s extraordinary Grace. As the author of the Book of Hebrews shows us, even in the first century, many Christians were willing to swap God’s Grace for the spiritual equivalent of bean stew. The author warns the people that when you let go of something as foundational as Grace, the “root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.”

Trouble indeed! The earliest Christians believed that what Jesus accomplished on the Cross reveals that God’s Grace is for all people, not just the chosen few. Therefore, God’s forgiveness and salvation is for all people, too, including the very people who crucified Jesus. That message has always been challenged by those who think it is too good to be true. The entire letter Paul writes to the Galatians is a defense of God’s universal Grace and Salvation in the face of those who were claiming that it is given only to those who “deserve” it by believing and acting in a certain way. Paul argues that salvation is by Grace alone, not Grace plus anything else.

Nowadays, a lot of Christians are still swapping the precious gift of Grace for a giant bowl of self-righteousness, and self-righteous indignation toward those who don’t believe like they do. They even claim that Christians who believe in universal Grace and Salvation aren’t “true” Christians and are themselves undeserving of the gift.

Since when is Grace given only to the deserving? By its own definition, Grace is only given to those who don’t deserve it! The only way you can receive it, or hang onto it, is to treat Grace as the precious thing it is: something that is offered to you though you don’t deserve it. Only then is Grace capable of transforming your life, moving you not only to the assurance of God’s love for yourself, but to extend the Grace you’ve received to others who have yet to grasp that God’s Grace is for them, too.

So, the “stew” made from the “root of bitterness” continues to be consumed in our day, causing enormous trouble in the world. It’s a lot easier to bomb people who you believe stand outside of God’s Grace and Love. It’s a lot easier to deny them healthcare if they can’t pay for it, or access to proper education or clean

water. And it's a lot easier to justify privileges you enjoy over others if you think you deserve them and others do not. Privileges like a living wage or even making salaries that are a hundred or more times higher than others who work full time for the same company, or citizenship in a country that isn't yet torn apart by drug cartels or a civil war.

Now, lest you believe that I have traded the blessing of a non-partisan Gospel for the bean stew of partisan politics, let me remind you that a whole lot of politics – both good politics and bad politics – arises out of our beliefs about God and others, whether we acknowledge those beliefs or not. Bad beliefs, and bad politics, are hardly the domain of one political party or another or even one strain of Christianity or another.

Take, for instance, those who self-identify as “progressive” Christians. Many “progressive” Christians are only “progressive” with respect to their desire to be free from a more dogmatic or conservative belief system. They define themselves more by what they reject than what they embrace. They essentially say, “Whatever the fundamentalists (or Catholics) do badly, I won't do at all.” So if some Christians reduce the Bible to some sort of inerrant rule book, these “progressives” choose not to read the Bible at all. If some Christians think prayer will lead them to get whatever they want “in Jesus' name,” then these “progressives” don't do prayer. If some Christians' beliefs and actions make it embarrassing to self-identify as Christian in public or to invite your friends to church, these “progressives” hide their identity and don't invite their friends to church, thereby ensuring that mostly fundamentalist churches grow and their churches shrink.

No, for many, “progressive” Christianity means little more than, “I can do whatever the heck I want, and don't need to turn to any source of authority other than my own desires.”

In this respect, what concerns me most about “progressive” Christianity (which I consider to be my own particular “tribe”) is that so many so-called “progressive” Christians reject the notion of submitting oneself to God. That is, turning one's life, loves, and hopes over to our Creator in such a way that one sincerely seeks to discern God's will when making any important decision. Among many so-called “progressives,” there is less “Thy will be done,” and a lot more “My will be done.”

These Christians rightly point out that submission to God has often been used not to ensure that God's will be done but that the will of some imperfect, or even

corrupt, Christian leader's will be done. And they are quite right. They also argue that submission to a god who would open the gates of heaven to some people and torture others for all of eternity is utterly repugnant and in no way represents a God who "loves us beyond our wildest imagination" would do. They are, of course, quite right here, too. Further, they claim that the notion of submission itself has been used all too often to degrade people, or strip them of the power of human freedom and agency, or make them feel guilty and ashamed of themselves rather than reminding them that they are children of God, created in God's very image and likeness. True enough.

Yet these negative examples hardly negate the need to turn our lives over to God. They simply remind us that it is enormously important to decide what kind of God you turn your life over to. For, when you reject the biblical imperative to turn your life over into God's hands, you do not suddenly become free and dignified, and you most certainly do not "progress" beyond the sins of our imperfect fathers and mothers of faith. Instead, you end up trading the extraordinary blessing of your inheritance as a child of God for the bean stew of living by your own power and authority.

As Bob Dylan observes, "You've got to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you're gonna have to serve somebody." In refusing to submit our lives to God and serve a Love and power higher than ourselves, we cut ourselves off from the only power that can truly save us from ourselves.

If all this talk of submission to God puts you on edge, like I'm really just encouraging you to submit to some version of God that you do not believe in – perhaps some god who still looks overly much like a version of God you have rejected and thought you'd never meet again if you worshipped at Countryside Community Church, then I hope you will consider at least trying the following:

Every day for the next month, pray this way:

"I vow to submit myself to You, God, but ONLY on the condition that You truly exist, are truly aware of me, and truly love me and all people beyond our wildest imagination. If all these things are true, then I will endeavor each day to turn more and more of my life over to you. I will do so imperfectly and can be expected to fail regularly to act on your guidance. I will not always 'hear' what you have to say to me correctly when I am sincerely trying to do so, so I am bound to make lots of mistakes. Yet, if You are the God I hope You are, then I

know I can trust in Your Grace when I fail. I will endeavor to offer others the same Grace when they fail as well.

“Until proven otherwise, I will continue to act on the faith that You are the God I have made my vow to, and will strive to act on Your will whenever it is made known to me. If at any point I should prove mistaken, and You are NOT a God who loves me and all people beyond our wildest imagination, then my promises to You shall be rendered null and void. But until then, I will move forward in faith and confidence that You are real, and really loving, and can guide me into becoming more like You are each and every day.”

Make this prayer every day for a month and see what happens. What do you have to lose? Besides a mushy bowl of bean stew ...