

Pentecost VI  
Genesis 25:19-34 and Matthew 13:1-9  
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A few years ago, I participated in a workshop on inter-cultural competency, designed to help pastoral leaders increase their awareness of the ways culture shapes identity. One exercise in the afternoon was to describe a beloved childhood food, which might offer a window into our culture. I thought about fried chicken . . . crisp on the outside, seasoned with just the right amount of spices, tender on the inside, so that your fingers got sticky and the juice might run onto your chin. Fried chicken is a Southern food. I am from the U.S. South. My mother could make a good platter of fried chicken. But it was not her chicken that came to mind. Instead, I saw the fried chicken made by Loretta Johnson, the African-American woman who worked as a housekeeper in my childhood home. Loretta came to our house each week, to help with the laundry, cleaning and childcare. Occasionally my mother would ask her to fry chicken for dinner as her last task of the day. Loretta was from Mississippi. She was a wife, mother, aunt, grandmother. Her cooking skills surpassed my mother's and her chicken was not simply good but sublime. I remember being a kid just tall enough to see above the stove and watching her expertly turning the pieces, glad to be right there.

When the image came to mind, my instinctive reaction was to suppress it. I can't write about that, I thought. It would expose the racial history of my childhood: a history that includes African American women leaving their own children to care for white children and the racial segregation that organized the town. Yes, it was true my mother paid Loretta a fair wage. In fact, she made sure the proper employment documents were completed so that Loretta received Social Security benefits, not only from our household but from every house in which she worked. My mother is a meticulous housekeeper and often they worked alongside each other. They grew to know each other well, stayed in touch after Loretta retired back to Mississippi, up until her death.

But there is no escaping the inequality built into their relationship; the differences existing between educational access, healthcare and vocational opportunity between our family and the Johnson's. The lines drawn along race and class seemed invisible yet were clear as those proverbial tracks that can divide a city. I didn't see those elements as a kid. But I do now. When the memory of smelling chicken frying on the stovetop surfaced in me that workshop-filled afternoon, complicated feelings accompanied it: most prominent feeling, the one that fueled my silence was shame . . . not shame that I grew up in a household that was secure, nourishing, because every human being deserves such things but shame that I was part of an unjust system, one granting much to one and much less to another, a woman who was feeding me.

Amid the many conversations that have begun in our country in the aftermath of George Floyd's death is the overdue one about how deeply race is woven into the fabric of our daily interactions; how often – too often - race is the determining factor in things such as one's physical safety or life expectancy. These overdue conversations are not easy. They are

downright scary, because of the feelings they evoke, the pain they can uncover, the wounds they can expose. But recent events have also shown us that lives are at stake. That lives have always been at stake. As people who claim to follow the God of life, our baptismal identity calls us to fight for life of one another.

Now the story I opened with spoke of two families, deeply intertwined and significantly different. Today's scripture from Genesis is also a family story about intertwined yet divided lives. Abraham's son Isaac has married Rebecca. They are heirs of God's promise for children, land, and future. Like her mother-in-law, Rebecca struggles to conceive. After twenty years and much prayer, Rebecca is pregnant, carrying twins in her womb, two sons who cannot stop twisting, jabbing and wrestling with each other. If they fight this much before birth, she wails, what will they do outside the womb? Indeed, from their birth they seem destined to be at odds. Esau is red, hairy, a hunter who leaves early in the morning, spends his day traversing the wilderness, with exhilarating stories of his conquests to tell at dinner. Jacob, let's imagine, has a head of black hair, none of his brother's thirst for adventure. He is quiet, inclined to stay closer to home. The sons' differences bring out the parents' own prejudicial inclinations. Although occupying one household, the family seems to be splitting apart.

As the eldest Esau is in line to receive his birthright – rights conferred by the order of his birth – which is two times the inheritance amount that his younger brother will receive – and the position as the established leader of the household. This is the law of primogeniture. As Walter Brueggemann notes, a whole social structure is erected through a law that privileges one child over another, a practice that destines some to advantage and some to disadvantage; calling it the natural right of birth.

Jacob, even in the womb it appears, senses his disadvantage, He seeks an opportunity to shift the order. It comes . . . in the form of the meal, dinner being cooked, by the younger for the older. I'm famished, he cries. In his hunger he gives away the birthright. This trade of food for birthright sets up a lifetime of division between the two brothers as Jacob subsequently will trick his brother out of their father's blessing, then be forced to flee. The men will live estranged for decades.

Although a singular, incomplete piece of a much greater saga, today's text offers three lessons for us as we imagine taking up the difficult work of talking about race, dismantling racism. The first message is to not be dissuaded by conflict; and instead to grasp that the hard work of naming and understanding America's original sin, and the subsequent systems that we are born into and which keep parts of our country living vastly different lives – is going to require painful talk. Genesis 25 is the story of a family in conflict. God doesn't shy away from the conflict, but moves to work through it. God keeps at it, keeps trying to pour out a blessing, even as it appears the brothers will be separated forever.

Second, Esau and Jacob present two portraits of how one might exist within a social or familial network, dual approaches that invite analysis. Jacob is the supplanter, the one who upends the expected inheritance. He represents the long line of biblical characters who are younger,

weaker, or less advantaged who find themselves recipients of God's blessing. The Bible is unabashedly protective of those who live with less and sends to us this directive; overturning of the stratified life. And then there is Esau, whom presents us with a portrait of a privileged elder son who, in his reflexive, unthinking way sells his birthright, with a seemingly lack of awareness about what he has really done. I think Esau illustrates the protection of privilege; the choice not to really see what you have. Here the hard work is focused on opening eyes, recognition of another's understandable desire to be included in the blessing of life.

Lastly, today's kitchen scene is only the beginning of the Jacob-Esau story, which will span another 8 chapters. Jacob will settle down, raise prosperous herds, marry, have children. All the while he will remember the unhealed wound of his brother's estrangement. Eventually the push for healing will lead to a meeting of brothers; Jacob tries to appease his guilt by bringing a host of gifts for his brother. Esau run out to meet him, embrace him with a kiss. Looking at Jacob's generous gifts, he will reply, Keep them. I have enough. Jacob will exclaim Seeing you is like seeing the face of God.

As your Lead Pastor, I know the welcoming love the Grace community seeks to offer one another. I know, so well, the commitment of this congregation to thoughtfulness, truth-telling, justice-seeking, to thoughtful reflection, and real relationships. And I know that our country lives with unhealed racial wounds, that we, as church, are part of our country's brokenness. This moment in time is asking us to take those sacred qualities and put them to use on the journey toward racial justice, even as it requires risky conversations, and painful acknowledgements. It is the path toward blessedness, shaped by God's hand rather than our control. These risky, vulnerable steps are the seeds of transformation; generous seeds tossed by the divine sower along our path, so that the good news of God's love – unequivocal, equalizing force that can build bridges, mend wounds, renew common life anew, might find a place deep within us. May it be so.