

“THE RED STUFF”
GENESIS 25:19-34

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University Church of Chicago
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Have you seen the movie, “The Great Debaters”? If not, I highly recommend it. The story of the 1935 debate team at a small, historically black college located in Marshall, Texas, the movie was produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring, among others, Denzel Washington. It tells how the Wiley College debate team went all the way to the national finals under the leadership of Professor Melvin Tolson, one of our nation’s most accomplished African American poets and a political radical who work in the thirties and forties with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

The real hero of the movie is a fourteen-year-old debater named James Farmer, who later founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). When those first Black college students staged their sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, it was to Jim Farmer that they turned. It was Jim Farmer who organized those first Freedom Rides across the South in 1961. It was Jim Farmer who organized Freedom Summer 1964 in Mississippi.

Jim and I had a few things in common. Part of our respective childhoods were spent in Marshall, Texas. We both received honorary degrees from Wiley College. Jim entered Wiley College when he was fourteen years old, received a degree and went to theological school at Howard University. But he chose not to be ordained a Methodist minister, because in those days the Methodist Church was highly segregated and Black ministers could not even serve in white conferences. His father was the first Black man in the history of Texas to receive a Ph.D. degree, and Jim moved from a protective academic environment into the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement.

When Martin Luther King delivered his I Have A Dream Speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, Jim Farmer was in jail in Plaquemine Parish, Louisiana, for “disturbing the peace.” A friendly FBI agent told Jim that the feds had infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana, and the Klan had voted to assassinate Mr. Farmer if he ever returned to that state. Jim asked what was for him a typical question: “Were there any dissenting votes?”

Jim Farmer was a complex man and although he did not attend church in his last years, didn’t have much to do with organized religion, he was a deeply spiritual man. He was a follower of Jesus in the best sense of the word and a proponent of Gandhian non-violence. When asked about nonviolence as a tactic in the movement, he replied, “It’s not a tactic. It’s a way of life.” He had a lot of difficulty with organized religion. For him there were no easy answers to faith questions, and he despised hypocrisy.

He was a lot like Jacob, the patriarch of the twelve tribes, a man born in conflict, a man selected by God for a special mission and a person who hated hypocrisy and dishonesty.

I suspect that he would have been very much like Jim Farmer: suspicious of any religion that makes people into categories or figures instead of seeing them as real people. From birth to death, Jacob turns all the usual rules on their head while remaining true to his core beliefs. He's a searcher, a questioner, a person compelled to wrestle with life's meaning, even to wrestling with an angel of God.

The writers of the Genesis stories put him in direct contrast to his brother Esau. Jacob may be wily and complex, but he knows what he wants. Esau is more like a postmodern man. Whatever he wants he needs. On the other hand, Jacob never confuses wants with needs. He's a man of purpose. Esau, as we soon discover in the story, acts on impulse. If he's hungry, he wants food. Now! If he wants something, that moment of desire is all that's important. Damn the consequences. I'm going to get it.

The problem with such people is that they often forsake principle for the precipitate, what they really believe for what will get them by. Do you remember that piece of dialogue in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* between Hamlet and Polonius? Hamlet knows that his friend is a sycophant, one of those people who is always sucking up to authority.

Hamlet. Do you see yonder cloud, that's almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius. By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius. It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet. Or like a whale?

Polonius. Very like a whale.

Esau is like Polonius. He could accept whatever seemed probable, especially if his superiors suggested it to him. He lives for the moment and because he has no long-range goals, he's susceptible to isolation. His individual needs are more important to him than their effect on his family and the community of which he is a part.

The Bible, like its offspring the Church, is always concerned about the individual. But it is also concerned about how the individual finds identity within and as part of the community of faith.

Community forms around a shared story and arises out of action. Action begins as an individual event but it immediately touches others and achieves its ultimate fruition in community. Hannah Arendt deals with this reality in amazingly penetrating ways in her seminal book, *The Human Condition*. Community becomes "the setting of a new beginning through action, always falling into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt." Those actions give "a space of appearance" which is "the power generated when people gather together and 'act in concert.'"

A less philosophical illustration appeared on a segment of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" dealing with the history of the song "We Shall Overcome." One of the most remarkable African American women of our time, Bernice Johnson Regan of the Freedom Singers recalled how she had learned the song as "I Shall Overcome."

The Left, dominated by Whites, believed that in order to express the group you should say “we.” In the Black community, if you want to express the group you have to say “I.” Because if you say “we,” I have no idea who is going to be there.

Have you ever been to a meeting and someone says, “We are going to bring some food tomorrow to feed the people.” And you sit there on the bench and think, “HmMMMM...” You have no idea!

It is when I say, “I’m going to bring cake,” and someone else says, “I’ll bring chicken” that you actually know you’re going to get a dinner. There are many Black traditional, collective expression songs where it’s “I,” because in order for you to get a group, you have to have “I’s.” [People have to be willing] to stand up and name themselves.

The Jacob cycle is formed in a kind of—forgive me, I will explain the phrase—series of epistemological concentric circles. Will God give the blessing? Will Jacob trust only in the blessing? Can the purpose of God upset the normal rights that the tradition has mandated? Epistemology is about knowing, about how we know what we know, about prayer and reflection, action and decision all linked together.

Jacob is designated by God for a special purpose, but in the process of receiving God’s blessing, he deceives, gets deceived, runs away, hides, is brought out of cover, finds ways to outwit both his brother and his father-in-law, has an unhappy love life with one wife, a happy but tragic love life with his second wife, marries two more times and gets his name changed. He is born as the second of twins to Isaac and Rebekah after her barrenness is overcome as an answer to prayer. Her husband is sixty when she gets pregnant and the pregnancy is so difficult that she says, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” When she asks God about the situation, the Divine One says in effect, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” God reveals to her that she is carrying twins and that the twins represent conflicts that will go on and on for generations.

So, when the boys are born, the first one comes out of the womb all red and hairy, looking like the fierce, feared Edomites who roam the north country. So, in a play on words he’s named Esau. The second child is holding onto the heel of the first when they are born, and they name him Jacob. That name also is a play on words. It can mean “heel” or “jerk” or “the one who has his hand in your pocket.” Or it can mean “God protects” or “the protection of God is assured.”

The father, Isaac, favors the older boy. He’s the epitome of real manhood: strong, a man who loves to hunt and conquer and till the land. The mother’s favorite is Jacob, the one who lives in tents and reads and thinks. The older boy by tradition has the right of primogeniture, the one who will inherit the land and all the possessions of the father. He’s the heir. Primogeniture was not simply one rule among many in Israelite society. It was the linchpin of an entire social and legal system which defined rights and privileges and provided a way around family disputes about who got what upon the death of the parent.

So, when Jacob seems able to wrest the blessing from his older brother for a bowl of “red stuff” (the Hebrew word is a play on the color of Esau’s hair and beard), Esau can remain

somewhat comfortable. He thinks it's just a harmless game. The birthright is given, institutionalized, a vital part of their culture. What does it matter if he can seem to sell it cheaply? Who would believe Jacob's story? There's still the old man, the blind father, who has the ultimate blessing to bestow no matter what happens at the supper table. And God? Would God be put on the side of someone as unscrupulous as Jacob?

The answer to that last question is "Yes." We are not told why God challenged the legitimated convention of the community by designating this "heel" of a man to be the heir of Israel's fortune. But God does what God decides to do. This same God will reveal divine mysteries to Jacob in a vision of a ladder and angels, and this same God will struggle with Jacob and leave him crippled.

The story of Jacob presents us with the inscrutable, dark, terrifying, unpredictable side of God. It is this God who comes to and travels with the unworthy and unvalued until they are brought home, people like a prodigal son who throws away his daddy's fortune, people like a traveler on the road to Jericho who is ministered to by a hated Samaritan. It is the same scandalous God who finally settled on a Crucified One as the way to make all things new.

This is the God we don't like to talk about, because our picture of God, the One to whom we pray, is a God who comes down chimneys and can be manipulated by our prayers and is always sweet and smiling and benevolent. But the God in this story is One who not only blesses conflict but helps to initiate it.

What is happening in our country when those who are working two and three jobs to make ends meet; struggling families are worried sick in July about what it will cost to heat their homes in January, food costs and home foreclosures are soaring is not only scary but despicable. And Phil Gramm will have none of our complaints: Get over it! Stop whining and eat your gruel. The recession's all in your head. The massive right-wing hatred that pervades so much of our culture tempts us to psychologize or put those nuts into neat little sociological categories. But those answers are too easy. What Phil Gramm and his ilk represent is something that lies just beneath the surface of every one of our lives. Every one of us has a list of people we refuse to forgive, people whom we label, people who are so difficult that we would turn on them in a minute, because that's what they do to us. We have to deal with our own hatreds and categories as we look at the woes that plague our nation.

The story of Jacob and Esau is not just about a dumb and hungry farmer who gets cheated by his city-slicker brother. Or about impulsiveness and surrendering life's most important treasures for momentary pleasure. The convenient thing to do with this story is to moralize either way: (a) Jacob should not have cheated his brother or (b) Esau was impulsive and dumb and lost his most precious right because he wasn't paying proper attention. Two stories are being told at the same time and they cannot be separated. Human conflict and divine confrontation walk side by side. Jacob is a complicated, difficult human being, but the God who guides him and wrestles with him is even more complicated and difficult to understand.

And Esau. He doesn't just get dismissed by the narrator because of his self-centered stupidity. Esau is clearly seen by the story teller as well as by the old father Isaac as the better of the two boys. The narrative never argues that Jacob is justified in what he does or that he's a nice guy. It claims only that he is designated by God, in spite of his own merit or lack of it.

Temple University in Philadelphia was born out of 57 cents from a little girl who wanted a better place to attend Sunday School. The church she attended was so small that they couldn't accommodate all the children adequately. So she began to save her pennies to give to a building fund for a larger church. When she died at a very young age of tuberculosis, her parents found her red pocketbook which contained the 57 pennies and a scrap of paper telling the reason for saving them.

Her pastor told the story when he conducted the little girl's funeral and the Philadelphia *Inquirer* printed it. What could a little girl's 57 pennies do? Well, they did a lot. A tide of gifts was launched to help build the Baptist Temple and they proved the nucleus of even greater things. Over \$250,000 poured in and out of the Temple was born Good Samaritan Hospital and Temple University. From fifty-seven cents saved by a little girl.

This unpredictable, conniving, scandalous God who takes the smallest and the meanest, the most insignificant and the downtrodden and uses them for greater glory is the One who transforms Jacob. Or at least partially. After all, God still leaves us freedom.