

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.12.26

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

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!" (479)

Mac Barnett is a children's book author who made a lot of people angry recently. It's not difficult to do these days; we seem primed for anger these days. But this outrage wasn't typical of what's been ticking us off. It was a boiling over of a more long simmering sense of offence—the offence a critic always induces, not least when that critic is right.

Mac Barnett, in writing a book for adults about children's literature, sounded in one brief moment more like the book critic he sometimes is, for the *New York Times* among other outlets, than the children's book writer he more primarily is—and an award-winning one at that. In the book entitled *Make Believe: On Telling Stories to Children*, Barnett offers a full-throated defense of children's literature, and more specifically picture-books which are his most prized form. These, he claims, are works of literary art in their own right. And he notes that much of what's published for children operates more like a vehicle for the values of the adults writing them and the adults eventually to buy them. They are moralistic more than they are wilderness journeys. They're simplistic fables meant to teach an important lesson more than entries into the wild world that is a child's imagination—and, if you please, simply the human imagination.

Not that there isn't a rightful place on any bookshelf for a book that teaches an important lesson—say please and thank you; don't push or interrupt; brush your teeth; be nice to animals—which lesson would be unmistakable as the take-away point of it all. So obvious are so many of these books, they are none of them great literature, or even all that good. Indeed, most of them are crud.

This is the line that got so many riled up: his claim that about 94.7 percent of books intended for children are crud.

For what it's worth, this was to recall science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon. A half century ago, in defending his own genre, Sturgeon claimed that 90 percent of science fiction is "crud." He then went on to claim, as if to imply that this isn't actually a problem, that 90 percent of everything is crud. And by this, he established what would come to be known as Sturgeon's law, that 90 percent of everything of its kind is crud.

Riffing off this, Barnett wrote of his "nagging fear that children's literature suffers from a slightly higher crud percentage than literature as a whole," worrying that "maybe more like 94.7 percent of kids' books are crud."

Well, as it happens I am the daughter of a woman whose master's degree was with a concentration in Children's Literature. I am also a mother who spent many years as a reader doing so out loud to my children, books with pictures. This is to say, I am not offended by Barnett's assertion. This, far from controversial, was gospel truth in my upbringing, my mother suffering but sadly too many bad children's books.

While, on the contrary: the edgy world of *Where the Wild Things Are*, or the wondrous world of *The Snowy Day*, or the expansive though holding world of *Blueberries for Sal*. ("Ker-plink, ker-plank, ker-plunk.") These were all places prized for inviting further exploration rather than serving up a cut-and-dried central message—and they were written by people of genius rather than minds reduced to the simple minds of children, as if children have simple and reductive minds. (They do not.)

I'll admit, as a reader, I never got to the point where I could fully discern whether a children's book was good or great (though the bad ones weren't hard to figure out). I just never set my mind to such concentrated thought about it all. But I have set my mind to such concentrated thought about scripture, which, as it happens, I think has suffered the same crudding up.

Scripture: we do it no service when we read it for a "lesson," notwithstanding that in many church services the readings are presented as lessons. Indeed, we do ourselves no service when we reduce this devotional text—wild in its considerings, majestic in scope if also at times minute, unwieldy in genre types found herein—(reduce it) to mere takeaways for better Christian living. The Bible, neither its oldest entries (Job, Genesis) nor its newest (the pastoral letters of the New Testament), never purports to be a moral text, showing us right from wrong, good from bad, with the one exception, I suppose, the Book of Proverbs. As for the people in the Bible, the characters considered there: it could be argued that none are presented so to be role models for us. It's possible none are presented in terms of "how to be" or "how not to be," are rather just presented as they are, as they were.

This is the perspective Marilynne Robinson brings to the Bible. As herself a writer of literary fiction, and a reader and teacher of the same, she's also a church-going Christian, a member of a congregation of the United Church of Christ in the Iowa conference. Her book *Reading Genesis*, which we read as a church book club, is notable for its taking the

characters of the Bible seriously as people and not reducing them to mere role models, types of the faith.

She does this not least in regard to the story cycle concerning Jacob, as “one who takes by the heel.”

Jacob is a vexing character in the Bible because he seems so often like a lousy person, a lousy brother to Esau and a treacherous son to Isaac. But he’s never condemned as such, and indeed he gets a lot of favor from God. Yet in the reading of the Bible that would have everyone either good or bad, this means that, in spite of seeming so lousy, Jacob is to be taken as good, even a hero of the faith (some Bible curricula even calling such as these “Heroes of the Faith.”) Consider, though, this passage alone, which we just heard moments ago. Here, he teases his poor brother with food while he’s hungry, exploits his brother’s apparent incapacity to delay gratification, and makes off with his birthright, that is the right that comes to the first-born son as unquestioned.

It’s for this birthright, perhaps, that Esau was his father’s favorite. Or it might be that Esau was a more manly and therefore acceptable son, hairy and rough, successful at the hunt, happiest when in the fields. This, while Jacob was more a man of the tent, here even cooking—which might be why he was his mother’s favorite. Maybe she liked having someone to share in the chores of domesticity. Or maybe she was compensating for Isaac’s favoring Esau, his perhaps obvious favoring of Esau. Rebekah’s motherly attention might have been a consolation prize.

Whatever were the finer points of the dynamic, this can be said: here was a family off kilter, like all families are from time to time: off kilter. Indeed, these were people and circumstances not as “ought to be” but as “is,” which is to say these are not as we should be but as we are.

As such, Robinson doesn’t merely take issue with Jacob. She notices Esau’s peccadilloes as well: “There is little reason to suppose that Esau is really at the point of starvation. He is brusque with hunger and impatience, rude and demanding toward Jacob, gone as soon as he has had his fill. For Esau to have accepted this meal at the price of his standing and his responsibility within the family does, as the text says, show contempt for his birthright. Jacob might have been surprised at the effect of what was meant only as a

bitter little joke. It was brought on in that moment by Esau's self-engrossed impulsiveness, hardly a promising trait in someone destined to act as a figure of authority."

For what it's worth, Robert Alter gives more cause to take issue with Esau. Professor of Hebrew and comparative literature, Mr. Alter, in his translation of, and commentary on, this story, highlights Esau's boorishness all the more.

First he translates Esau's insistence on the food thus: "Let me gulp down some of this red red." And he notes that, though very often in these ancient stories the voices of the characters when speaking are the same as the overall narrative voice, here the voice in speech is quite degraded. That is, "the writer comes close to assigning substandard Hebrew to the rude Esau." The famished brother can't even come up with the ordinary Hebrew word for "stew," rather points and practically grunts, calling the contents of the bubbling pot simply this "red red."

What's more, according to Alter, "the verb he uses for gulping down [this red red] occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but in the rabbinic Hebrew it is reserved for the feeding of animals." But this verb is nearly never translated into English to suggest Esau eating like an animal, which means even the translators of the Bible come to this text with expectations that it be decent and polite. For how could holy writ be so fallen as your typical human?

All this said, Ms. Robinson, for one, doesn't rest on Esau's delinquencies. She writes, "...Jacob's behavior is not handsome, either. Yet this is providence working itself out. Esau with his craving for 'the red pottage' might have caught Jacob brooding on the thought that he had the favor of his mother only because his father so strongly preferred Esau. And here he was among the tents, stirring a pot, while his robust and hairy brother was off in the fields with quiver and bow, doing just what his father loved him for. If Jacob had been a little less envious, if Esau had been a little less boorish, this epochal turn of things, this wholly unimpressive moment, would never have entered sacred history."

And as for what lesson Robinson *does* take from the text, what conclusion she does feel right in drawing: it's not that we be like this person or like that one, it's not that we recognize as a role model this brother or that one, but is, based in the evidence of the biblical witness, "...the fact that the covenant is not contingent upon human virtue, even human intention. It is sustained by the will of God, which is so strong and steadfast that it

can allow space within providence for people to be who they are, for humanity to be what it is.”

Of course, it's maddening to consider that history turns on moments of non-import or even accident, of human existential blindness, a Mister-Magoo-like bumping along. It's utterly maddening to think what grand unfolding can come of some near-miss that, if actual miss, would have been an impoverishing of history.

I, years ago, heard tell of someone whose grandmother sang as a child in a church choir down south. This was during Jim Crow, and this choir director's sister decided to arrange for the church choir to go north on a choir tour to bring awareness to what the sweltering south was still suffering.

The one hurdle the possibility of the tour had to clear, struggled to clear, almost very nearly didn't clear, was in finding a bus in good enough condition to travel that journey but also available at no cost. After a long time struggle, the choir director's sister got a bus, and the choir went on the journey, and one of the young singers became aware of a northern college that she then, a few years later, got a scholarship to, having recalled to the admissions committee her previously performing in the college chapel. She would be the first Black student to matriculate there, and upon graduation she'd move still further north where she would meet her husband and together they'd have a child, which child turned out to be instrumental in making the Civil Rights' Act happen.

I heard this and, I swear to God, about a week later I started crying and didn't stop for a few days. How can it be that history pivots on whether or not a free bus will avail itself? How can it be that humans make progress on the delicate balance of a bus junky enough to be free but not so junky not to start?

I hate that!

This hatred of human possibility, human failure, human perseverance, is the impulse to turn the stories we tell of ourselves into hero myths or cautionary tales. It is the impulse to reduce history, this intolerable string of accidents that somehow come to coherence, to reduce it all to lessons or stories with morals, easy to understand and to act on. The Great Man theory of history is one school of thought I never entered, the romantic idea from the 19th century that history can be largely explained by the impact of great men, heroes. So goes the theory: highly influential and unique individuals, due to their natural attributes,

such as superior intellect, heroic courage, extraordinary leadership abilities or divine inspiration, have a decisive historical effect. I rather stumbled into women's history, making my way through my education, one course following another that rang true or awakened new thinking. Women's history, like people's history, has far greater tolerance for the whoops of it all.

Which whoops doesn't thwart larger and good purpose but gets folded into it, responded to, redeemed even.

This parable—this parable of the sower of seeds and the various types of soil—is funny because, while the good soil leads to good fruit, the other soils (the not-called-good soils) all have good effects as well. Birds eat. Rocky ground, not so good for crops, is good for building on (which, didn't Jesus say elsewhere in this very gospel something about “a wise man who built his house on rock...”? Yes. Yes, he did say that.) This parable is funny, as all parables are, because the take-away point is less and less obvious the more you think about it. History is sown seeds, which seeds will find their own good end. Providence is sown seeds, wherein sowers are seen to sow possibility no matter what or wherefore.

As we move inexorably into a future that some would anticipate excitedly as post-human, I find myself doubling down on my interest in actual humans, and recognize more and more a biblical interest in actual humans. The urge to crud up the biblical story of God-with-us, to crud it up with interpretations that insist upon heroes of the faith and well-managed moralizing, changes the story utterly, no longer about God's faithfulness to us but about some people's worthiness of that steadfast faith. But that then changes the nature of this steadfast faith. God isn't with us because we are good. We are good because God is with us, providence opening a way for us to participate in what's good by which we might become evermore good.

I used to wear braids in my hair as a child when I was a child, long hair and fine in texture, not all that compliant. I'd begin the day with two neatly arranged braids formed around my ears, but by the end of the day much of my hair would have come loose, sprigs shooting off from each braid that still somewhat held. Next day, I'd do it again, and the braids would cohere. And off into another day, school bus, recess, sprigs shooting loose. Braids can get messy, especially on a child. It's okay.

Thanks be to God.

