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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Are You Trading Your Birthright for a Bowl of Soup?”

Scripture Text: Genesis 25:29-34

Dear people of God, one of the dumbest people in the Bible is Esau. He will always be remembered as the man who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Before we're too hard on him, though, we should remember that all of us have done some dumb things in life, haven't we? Esau may have done some stupid things, made some stupid decisions, and acted stupidly at certain times, but he wasn't totally stupid. He was a skilled and sly hunter. It takes a considerable amount of cunning and ability to capture wild animals in their habitat. That's why Esau was the favorite of his father, Isaac. He was a son who would have made any dad proud because of his hunting skills.

Each of us has skills like Esau in some ways, but share his stupidity in others. Some of us have good administrative skills and can organize and manage persons and things very deftly. Others are very useful with their hands and can build and fix things with ease. Still others are good at

relating with people and have excellent interpersonal skills. And still others have acutely analytic minds and can do research and write technical material quite ably. But the good administrator often loses his keys. The handy person can't program the DVD player. The people person has difficulty ordering at restaurants. And the analytic person gets lost driving. He may drive around and around in circles, especially in Boston. Not mentioning any names.

Getting back to Esau, he may have done some dumb things in his life, but he had some good qualities also. In addition to his being a rugged outdoorsman and a hunter of considerable ability, he was also a caring person. He was especially devoted to his aging father. When Isaac was old and blind, Esau was very sensitive to his needs. If Isaac wanted something to eat, Esau would fetch it for him. Esau also had a forgiving nature. His devious brother, Jacob, twice defrauded him. Twice. Most of us would have the attitude: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." But not Esau. He forgave Jacob, first, for defrauding him out of the birthright. And then, again, for defrauding him out of the blessing.

Esau may have realized, too late, that being duped out of his birthright was no excuse. After all, how hungry could he have been to

trade something that had the value of a lifetime for something that would provide satisfaction for only a few minutes? Still, what kind of brother was Jacob that he would seek to take advantage of a sibling's hunger in order to swindle the birthright from him? And cheating him out of his father's blessing was just plain trickery. What kind of brother does that?

Yet, even after the second time that he was bamboozled by his brother, Esau nevertheless forgives him. After many years of being estranged from him, Jacob comes sneaking back home in much fear and trembling, wondering what kind of welcome he would receive from the brother whom he had defrauded. But when Esau sees Jacob, he runs to embrace him as if nothing bad had taken place between them. Esau, unlike many of us, refused to hold a grudge against his brother. He would not continue to loathe and despise his brother. He would not allow hatred and resentment to eat him up and blacken his soul. Though he knew that he was wronged, Esau knew that Jacob was still his brother and that the bond between the two of them could never be broken.

Today, many of the descendants of Esau, namely, the Palestinians, and many of the descendants of Jacob, namely, the Israelis, are seeking a similar reconciliation. Though the Palestinians have been hoodwinked, by

the Israelis, the British, and self-serving Arabs, most wish to be reconciled to their cousins, and wish to live peaceably with their Jewish neighbors on their own land as a sovereign nation. Likewise many Israelis, realizing the guilt of their nation in confiscating land that doesn't belong to them, also seek reconciliation with their Semitic cousins.

What about us? Are we seeking to be a community of reconciliation? We can start with our own families. Are we estranged from family members? What was the cause? Money? Jealousy? Hurtful words or actions? Do we want to take these hostilities to our graves? As they say, life is too short. Are we better persons for holding on to these grudges? I think most of us would admit in our better moments, no, we're not. We're just digging a hole for ourselves, and the longer we dig, the harder it will be to climb out. Why not jump out of the hole and bury the grudges instead?

Do we dread seeing relatives during the upcoming holiday season? You should come and watch today's Movie Matinee so that you learn what not to do around relatives who annoy you or press your buttons.

But let's get back to Esau's first mistake. He sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. And that's what Esau is most famous for today. It's

too bad. Not just for Esau, but also for his descendants. And so, generations of Jews and Christians are brought up to think that Esau is dumb and Jacob is smart. Esau is bad and Jacob is good. Esau is rejected by God and Israel is chosen by God. This gets translated today into believing that Palestinians are dumb and Israelis are smart. Well, there's no doubt that Jewish people are smart, but Palestinians happen to be the most educated of any Muslim ethnic group. This gets translated today into believing that Palestinians are bad and Israelis are good. Certainly there are lots of good Israelis, but there are lots of good Palestinians also, Palestinians who are working for peace, both in this country and in Palestine. Peter Makari will be talking about that next Sunday. This gets translated today into believing that Palestinians are rejected by God and that Israelis are God's chosen people. Israel was God's chosen people 2000 years ago, but God today doesn't play favorites. We are all children of God. Like any parent, God might be more disappointed with some of his children than others, but God loves all of them. God doesn't love Jewish people more than Palestinian people. And we should also remember that, worldwide, about 600,000 Palestinians are Christians, our brothers and sisters in the faith. And so, Esau's selling his birthright has

no bearing on the status of Palestinians today.

How would we feel if after we're gone, what history remembers about us is the worst thing we ever did? Like the time we got drunk and made a fool of ourselves? Like the time we were arrested for disorderly conduct? Like the time we cheated on our spouse? Let's not be too hard on Esau. Let's rather be careful about the way we live so that history records what's good about us.

And what about our family members? How do we want them to remember us? What kind of legacy do we want to leave our loved ones, our children and grandchildren, our friends and colleagues? Do we want to be remembered in the words of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who characterized the life of man as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"? Or do we want our loved ones to remember us for our good qualities? Do we want them to be proud of us or to remember us for doing something stupid? Esau is remembered for selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. He did lots of other things in his life. But that's what people remember him for.

General David Petraeus is a highly decorated war hero, former Commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, and former Director of the

Central Intelligence Agency. But he's most known today for having an extra-marital affair with his biographer Paula Broadwell. Yogi Berra is a Hall of Fame baseball player and considered one of the greatest catchers to every play the game. But he's most famous for his sayings that mangle the English language, which have become so famous that they've actually come to be known as yogiisms. Some may find Yogi's quotes to be entertaining, but in reality, we're really laughing at the man's stupidity. And of course, all I have to do is say the name, O. J. Simpson, and we all remember the same thing, right? Never mind that he was one of the greatest college and NFL running backs of all time, who was the first NFL player to rush for more than 2000 yards in one season, and went on to enjoy a successful acting career, all anybody remembers about O. J. today is that he was arrested for the murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman, and despite the fact that he was found not guilty by a jury, the majority of people think that he did indeed murder them.

Though Jacob was certainly not acting like a true brother in demanding that Esau trade his birthright for the bowl of soup, in the final analysis, we must blame Esau for this stupid transaction. He didn't have

to accept his brother's offer. It was his own shortsightedness and disregard for the birthright that permitted him casually to trade away something so valuable as the birthright. Receiving the birthright meant being the head of the family after Isaac passes away, including having charge of the family property. But most importantly, it meant having a special relationship with God as the head of not only his family, but of the covenant people Israel. With the birthright would come the blessing, which Esau also loses when Isaac was near his death. In Old Testament Israel, God dealt with the heads of families, not with each individual family member. As the possessor of the birthright, Esau would have special access to God that no one else in his family would possess.

It's easy to be critical of Esau's stupidity, but how often do we do similar stupid things? How often do we trade our birthright for a bowl of soup? How often have we allowed the hunger pangs of the moment to overwhelm us so that we surrender to pleasure or anger? How often have we allowed crumbs of passion or greed to prevent our seeing a glorious banquet in our future? It's easy if we're in pain or inconvenienced to give in to momentary satisfaction at the expense of a much more gratifying opportunity that awaits us. How scrumptious the lentil stew looks and

smells when we're hungry and tired compared to the value of the birthright. But after we've surrendered the birthright and eaten the stew, how satisfying does it appear then? But then it's too late. It can't be taken back. One of the mysteries of time is that it moves in only one direction: toward the future. We cannot undo what is done. It remains there in history as a stubborn fact forevermore.

Are you trading your birthright for a bowl of soup? When we're told that everyone is doing it, why not you? When we're told to "be cool or be cast out" as the song from Rush says, when we're told don't be such a square, live a little, that's when we need to call a personal time out and start thinking, "Is this really good for me and others about whom I care?" "Is this really what I want to be remembered for?" "Is this really redemptive, or will it eventually turn into waste, a waste of time, a waste of character, a waste of future opportunities?"

The soup may satisfy for the moment, but it won't last. The birthright satisfies forever. The birthright is everything valuable about you: your beliefs, your dignity, your integrity, your self-respect. Don't trade those things away for crumbs. Don't be remembered for stupid things you've done. Be remembered for things of which you're proud. Be

remembered for things that made your world a better place. Be remembered for things that enriched and edified others. Don't be remembered the way Esau is. Be remembered as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, faithful member of his church, and faithful citizen of his kingdom. Amen.