

“I Want to be First”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, July 10, 2011.

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Poor Jacob! Why does Esau always get to be first? Why does he always get to sit in the front of the chariot? Why does he get to go to bed later than me? Does Jacob’s predicament sound familiar?

Even if you are an only child, you know about birth order. We all have wondered whether our being born first, or middle, or last makes any difference in our personalities, or our station in life. Maybe if we are the firstborn, just being born first has given us the biggest piece of cake, or the best treatment, or the first privileges, or the other way around—being born first means that our parents had to experiment with us before they got good at parenting but were able to relax a little with the younger ones. We’ve heard that being born the “baby of the family” gives us the best treatment because we can stay a kid longer and get the best chores to do. We’ve heard that being born in the middle makes us peacemakers—what else can you be when you’re always in the middle? And if you’re not the oldest of your siblings, you may have wished, at least sometimes, that you were—everybody wants to be first.

When you’ve been born into a Chinese family, birth order takes on a whole different importance—a little like in the world of Jacob and Esau. Children learn that the whole point of being born, almost, is to carry on the family name. And only a boy can do that. And it’s the oldest boy who has this privilege in spades (though I’m not sure of how this works out in practice—all my relatives always had two girls and one boy). So when in my family the first child was born, my parents were of course ecstatic at having a new baby. Although it was a girl, my father’s mother named the baby Mei Li, or “Beautiful daughter” in Chinese. They did end up having a baby boy, by the way, after me, and his Chinese name is probably “O Holy and Honorable Ruler of the Universe” or something similar.

But when I was born, I was the second daughter, and so as is the custom, my father’s mother gave me a Chinese name also. But apparently being the second girl in a family that wants boys makes the naming a bit difficult, so I was named Gneung Ping, or “End of August.” There have been many times when I wanted to trade birth order with my older sister.

So in some cultures, birth order is not just a matter of who gets the biggest cake, or who gets to pick the best seat in the car. Birth order is politically important. It determines your inheritance and can automatically confer on you riches and power. But as Jacob finds out, birth order—being firstborn—doesn’t necessarily give you spiritual advantages. Being born first—or having birthright privileges—doesn’t automatically give you spiritual riches or power.

Look at Jacob, fraternal twin of Esau. He was born just seconds later, holding on to Esau's heel as he emerged from the womb, so he was called Jacob, which means "heel." When we meet him later in life, he certainly acted like one. Can you imagine refusing to give your brother a helping of food? It makes you wonder what their early years together were like, how they played games, and whether they fought over who gets to be first to be served dinner.

So Jacob spent a long time living up to his name, "heel." Our first encounter with Jacob is this embarrassing scene in which Esau comes in from two straight days of hunting, starving, and Jacob rudely demands firstborn status in exchange for a little bowl of food. Not surprisingly, we don't meet Jacob and Esau together for another 21 years or so. When they finally do meet, it is Esau who takes the high road. It is Esau, the one who was cheated out of political and familial power, who comes running up to hug Jacob. Jacob, on the other hand, meets Esau by hiding behind his least-loved wives, using them as human shields in case Esau has come with an army ready to fight. When Esau says, "Let's get together sometime," Jacob says "Yeah, sure," but we sense in the biblical story that they will never see each other again.

But seeds were planted in Jacob. It took years for those seeds—for his spirit and his wisdom—to grow and mature. For much of the time that we encounter Jacob, he is impetuous, bossy, hard-hearted, hard-nosed, inconsiderate, conniving, spoiled even, and not overly respectful of others. Eventually Jacob has to wrestle with his failings and come to terms with himself and his relationship with God. When he found himself one early morning just before meeting with Esau, wrestling with an angel, was he really wrestling with himself and his own alienation from God? Was he digging for the roots of his own spiritual needs? Was he trying to distinguish, in his mixture of spiritual seeds and plantings, which ones to nurture and which to leave aside?

We too are a mixture of seeds and plantings. Like Jacob's spiritual learnings, some seeds take years to grow.

One day I watched my father tend his tomato plants. The ground around the plants was very dry. I asked why he didn't keep the ground moist to feed the plants better. He said that he wanted the roots to work for their water, and when they don't find the water at the surface, they dig deeper and so they become a stronger, more solid plant when their roots go down deeper and they have learned to work for the food that nourishes them.

Like those tomato plants who needed to wrestle for their nourishment, and like Jacob who had to wrestle with God and with himself, and like a lot of things, we too need to wrestle with faith. Our faith may start to flag when we are teens or young adults. We are not ready, or have had bad experiences with church or religion. Or we went to a college like Berkeley in the '60's when Christianity has dozens or even hundreds of religious competitors, flaky or not. Who can blame the one who is not a totally receptive soil for the Maker's seeds every minute of the day?

We have times when, like Jacob, we let our spiritual plantings die. We hoard our possessions, whether it's a pot of lentil stew or a helping hand for our elderly neighbor's yard. We too have times when we have driven a hard bargain and taken advantage of someone more vulnerable than ourselves.

But we also have good soil in us, where seeds can grow. We all are born with generosity, love, compassion, empathy—we are, after all, created in God's image. Yes, some seeds will wither and die, but others can mature, and, like Jacob, will mature. And like Jacob, we will always be favored by God anyway, because, in the end, the sower is a careless Sower who is generous to a fault and forgiving to eternity.

Notice how many chances the sower gives to the land. God is extravagant, practically wasteful, with the seeds. Look how many chances God gives to us—we are given an extravagance of grace from God—moments of grace. Some we let slip by, we aren't paying enough attention. Other times we forget easily. But eventually some take root. It's not always easy. God sometimes makes us dig deep and work for our faith—to have deeper roots in our spiritual soil and to become stronger plants.

So Jacob may have been cunning politically but he was wrong spiritually. He thought he had to swindle his brother for the privileges of the firstborn—the right to be an heir. But the birthright given to us by God, is given to all of us, for free. We are all firstborns, all of us heirs of the kingdom. Everybody wants to be first—and we all are. Thanks be to God, our extravagant, extravagant Sower.