

Lentil Stew, with a Side of Grace
The Rev. Amy Spagna
July 16, 2023 – Pentecost 7A (Proper 10)
Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11

Life, and death, and danger, and sprinkling help and hope where it's needed: we've experienced all of them this week thanks to Monday's epic storm, the record flooding that resulted, and their aftermath. Vermonters seem to understand inherently what it is to help their neighbors in need. All over the state, folks are just showing up to help muck out flooded basements; rip out ruined carpeting, drywall, and insulation; and do the deep cleaning required to bring the process of restoring buildings to the status quo ante. Our neighbors up at Christ Church in Montpelier also took the time to set up their Wednesday community lunch on the sidewalk outside the church. Even with the damage the building has sustained thanks to the catastrophic flooding there, it was something they felt strongly that they had to do. That alone just goes to show us how much the "church" is the people, not the building it inhabits.

I have to admit, as I dug into today's readings, I wondered if it would in some ways have been easier to find solidarity with Noah this week, instead of with Jacob, Esau, Paul's take on life lived in the Spirit, and Matthew's version of the Parable of the Sower. But, by the same token, it'd also be tough to avoid the trap of using empty platitudes to wallpaper over the long-term consequences of the very deep emotions that are floating around our state right now. Those of you who were here for Irene in 2011 still have fresh memories of the catastrophic and traumatic damage it caused – and, more importantly, of how the community came together to clean up and care for those who'd lost everything. To put that experience into the framework of what the lectionary did give us, it's the sharp contrast between Esau thinking only as far ahead as his next

meal, and St. Paul's admonition to set our minds on the life and peace promised through the Spirit. It's that longer-term item that's got to stay in our forward field of vision right now, especially in the face of the immediate challenges of clearing away the debris and shoring up roads. As a rep from Episcopal Relief and Development reminded diocesan clergy earlier this week, it's going to be a long process, and it won't necessarily be a straight line between the immediate crisis and restoration of the "new normal". And that's just fine – because it's all too human not to deal well with the kinds of changes forced on us by major events like floods.

Instead of the reminder at the end of the Flood story that God will make sure things turn out OK, eventually, today's readings lean into the theme of what it is to be human. It's very apparent in the story of Esau selling his birthright to his heel of a younger brother for lunch is just how human it is. Who hasn't gotten into fights with a sibling, gotten so hungry that they're demanding food at any cost, dealt with messy family dynamics, or tried to trick someone into giving us exactly what we want?

The question Jacob's actions raise around what we're willing to give up for the immediate satisfaction of a full stomach just scratches the surface. There are a lot of issues lurking just beneath the surface in this story, including Jacob's dubious morals; things like inheritance and privilege and what we really value; and the benefits of thinking with our brains and not our stomachs. The bottom line here, and in the adventures of all of the patriarchs and matriarchs recorded in Genesis, is that things get messy when you're dealing with people – even ones who are supposedly "holy" and portrayed in the best light possible by the other people who edited together their stories into their final form. "There is nothing in Jacob's behavior that deserved God's favor –

actually God's favor comes in spite of Jacob's actions. [It] makes a strong case for God's grace – a God who is already involved with people in their mother's womb, within the very messiness and conflict of relationships."¹

Messiness and conflict are hallmarks of the relationship between Esau and his younger twin, Jacob. They could not have been more different, either in physical appearance or in temperament. The name of Esau, the older brother, is a play on the word for “red” in Hebrew, as well as the place names for Edom and Seir, where he would eventually end up living. His love of being out in the fields and hunting, and his rough way of speaking, are meant to suggest he’s not a clean-cut, well-dressed, or even-tempered kind of guy. Jacob, on the other hand, is a heel. Literally. His name in Hebrew, *ya'aqov*, contains the word for “heel,” as well as meaning something along the lines of “Trickster.” We get a glimpse of his future supplanting his brother and scheming his way to the top when he is born grabbing onto Esau’s heel. Jacob is definitely not what we might call a “man of integrity.” He uses Esau's demand for food as an opportunity to get his hands on what Esau rightfully stood to inherit as the firstborn son. And, as we will see over the next few weeks, he will continue to wrestle with other people and with God as part of what one scholar describes as a lifelong obsession with God’s blessing, as mediated through the blessing of his father Isaac.²

¹ Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34." www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-genesis-2519-34-2 [accessed July 10, 2023].

² Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-genesis-2519-34-4> [accessed July 13, 2023].

The temptations that come with being hungry, like Esau, and being motivated solely by the desire to get ahead, like Jacob, are just a part of what it means to be human. We all, at some point or another, become like them. It's in the realm of, say, Homer Simpson going after a donut he's been told not to eat. We stand there with the refrigerator door open, drooling and debating about what to do. We likely will eventually grab the donut and eat it, because our primitive part of our brain insists the immediate reward of the sugar and fat is absolutely worth it. We might come to regret it later, like Esau does. Or, we might take it just to have it and use it to our advantage later, like Jacob does.

Setting aside Jacob's sketchy ethics for a moment, it's what he does with that stolen inheritance that's important to the writers of Genesis. He's eventually able to use it to continue to fulfill the promise of land and descendants that God made to his grandparents, Abraham and Sarah. However, in this introduction to Esau and Jacob, the writers of Genesis are trying to make the point that God's actions where people are concerned are not exactly dependent on our being perfect examples of righteous and upstanding citizens. Esau and Jacob are both "complicated men in a lineage God has decided for God's own reasons to bless. Jacob is neither evil nor perfectly virtuous. He is human. So is Esau. This observation does not excuse them; but it does help us reflect on the ways God's work gets done through ordinary people."³

That work is getting done even now: by Woodstock firefighters who pumped out the foundation at White Cottage the other day; by the National Guard who delivered a

³ Valerie Bridgeman, "Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-genesis-2519-34-6> [accessed July 10, 2023].

pallet of bottled water to get those on town water through until the repairs are done; by everyone who's shown up to help clean out flooded buildings in places like Montpelier and Barre; and the volunteers who've done yeoman's work in the middle of all of it to get us ready to hold the Fair next Saturday. What all of us who've participated in this work have in common is the gift of knowing how to show up. We're definitely not perfect – but we do have a bit of Jacob and Esau in all of us, which can have the effect of demanding dinner without thinking about the cost, as well as leading us to think about how we can take advantage of a given situation. But. To balance that out, we all have the gift of grace, given to us by a God who will go to no end to encourage us to live like that grace matters. As Paul framed it: "you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Rom 8:8b, NRSV).