

July 16, 2017
Genesis 25:19-34
Matthew 7:6
“Honoring Our Pearls”
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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;
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. Afterwards 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. (Genesis 25:19-34)

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. (Matthew 7:6)

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.

We are a capitalist society where everything is for sale. While retail at brick and mortar stores plummet, online sales continue to skyrocket. Even Wholefoods grocery has gotten into the act selling produce and other perishables online. There is literally nothing you cannot find on the internet and have delivered to your door within 24 to 48 hours.

Many of *us* have gotten into the craze as well. I know my son, Carl has made money selling old Pokemon cards online, while my daughter Grace, sold some old furniture when she moved from an apartment to a house. Ebay will allow anyone anywhere to sell anything.

But I wonder: are there some things you'd never sell, under any circumstances? If your situation became so dire that you were between a rock and a hard place, what would you absolutely hold on to, regardless of the cost?

In the ancient world, one item incorporated not only material things but a person's identity and a whole lot more – the family birthright. Sell that, and you would have sold out completely. The birthright was the special privilege given to the firstborn male of any patriarch. The birthright's economic value was, depending on the father's prosperity, often enough to set up the firstborn son for life. At his father's death, the eldest son received a “double portion” of the inheritance, or double what his brothers would get.

The fancy word for it these days is primogeniture. And this practice wasn't just economic, (the currency in those days consisting largely of flocks, herds and slaves); it was also about leadership. Having the birthright meant exercising leadership over the family, replacing the father as the patriarch. The holder of the birthright made the decisions and ruled over his brothers and sisters, and the family line would be continued through him. In short, the birthright was designed to ensure the future of the family. Screw *it* up, and you screw up the family. Sell *it*, and you've sold away the future. That is why the story of Jacob and Esau is so intriguing.

Genesis tells us that Isaac's twin sons were already vying for power as soon as they exited the womb. The older son, Esau, we learn, would seem to have been the prototypical leader, given the description of him as red and hairy. That's third century BC for he was very manly. On the other hand, Jacob, who comes out of the womb holding onto Esau's heel, was smooth, soft and interested in “living in tents” rather than living in the field. That's third century BC for he was a momma's boy or more effeminate or perhaps both. Esau was thus clearly Dad's favorite, while Jacob was clearly Mom's.

The boys couldn't have been more different. Rebekah, their mother, had already been wrestling with the turmoil between them in her womb when she “went to inquire of the Lord” about her pain of having twins. God told her that the two boys struggling within her would eventually come to embody the struggle between two nations (Israel and Edom), and yet their roles would soon be reversed. “The one shall be stronger than the older,” God said, “and the elder shall serve the younger”. We're not sure if that's why Jacob, the younger, *was* her favorite, but later we'll see that she is more than glad to help this oracle come true!

We also don't know if Jacob knew about the oracle on that day when he was cooking up a stew; but it's pretty clear that he was already working on a deal to take advantage of his strong but stupid and impulsive older brother. We get the impression that Jacob wasn't just *making* stew; he was marketing it. He knew from experience that his brother was the kind of kid who wouldn't let his allowance even get warm in his pocket before spending it on the first shiny or sweet thing he saw in the store. All Jacob had to do is advertise, and Esau would be quick to make a deal.

Our text tells us that Esau was “famished” when he came in from the field. Viewed through his rather petulant nature, it appears that *he* interpreted his circumstance as being absolutely desperate, thinking he was “about to die”. But it is hard to believe that Esau would be that bad off after hunting.

What *we do* know is that by the world's standards at the time, Isaac's family was rich – a family of privilege. And what do *we* now know about the offspring of those who grow up pampered, wanting for little? When circumstances get uncomfortable, as they do whether one is rich or not, those of us who are more privileged are inadvertently taught that suffering is somehow beneath us. We thus have a tendency to exaggerate the effects of what's causing our pain, and we'll do anything to alleviate that pain, be it real or imagined. That leads to an all-or-nothing way of thinking that amplifies even the smallest inconvenience into a life-or-death crisis.

Effective marketing plays on this discomfort and can cause one to believe that one's life without this or that product or service will be diminished at best and threatened at worst. Suddenly *everything*, including parts of one's very soul, are seen as fair game for the selling.

Jacob knows this. And you can almost see him pausing long enough to let the aroma of the stew make Esau just a little crazier. "I'll be glad to give you some of this 'red stuff,'" Jacob says, "but first you need to sell me your birthright". Jacob knows that the value of a bowl of soup and the value of one's whole economic, social and familial future aren't equal, but he also knows that Esau, blinded as he always is by a little discomfort, doesn't see it that way.

Esau is willing to mortgage everything he could possibly become simply to have a taste of stew that he has probably had many times before. His stomach rules over his brain, and he sells his future for practically nothing. Jacob even gives him a minute to think about it, asking Esau to "swear" to the deal. Esau signs on the dotted line and eats perhaps the most expensive bowl of soup in the history of humanity.

Later, Jacob will also cheat Esau out of Isaac's "blessing," which is essentially the patriarch's last will and testament and charge to his successor. Jacob, with Rebekah's help, thus deceptively, but in a legally binding way, seals the deal that was originally struck at the stew pot. So while Esau has sold his future to satiate a day's hunger, Jacob seems to have sold his integrity to gain wealth and power. Both brothers are guilty of selling out in one way or another.

This story is a constant reminder to us that some things are sacred and should just never be for sale. Even advertisers know this.

You know the commercial: "*There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's what?.*" Mastercard.

Yes, Mastercard. These so-called "Priceless" ads have been around for years. The format is simple: a short list of goods or services, each accompanied by their dollar value. Then there's a final item: something intangible, to which no financial value could possibly be assigned – something like a weekend spent camping with your kids. The value of this final item is a single word, weightily intoned by the announcer: "priceless."

One advertising executive handling the campaign revealed the success of this campaign: "What really hit home with consumers," he said, "is that a company that is fundamentally all about making money and paying for things would actually declare that the things that really count can't be bought."

Yes. Some things *are* sacred and should just never be for sale. In his teachings, Jesus also cautioned:

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”

Jesus’ teaching seems to encompass and even exceed the cautionary tale of Jacob and Esau. Esau failed to understand and respect the value of something as priceless as his birthright. The saying of Jesus is certainly about that. But he also invites those who *do* know the infinite worth of something they possess, to be careful about how and with whom it is shared.

Each and every one of us is an inheritor of something quite precious – of infinite worth. It is sacred and holy. And that is our souls – our very lives – who we uniquely are and the way we value certain parts of life and of others. It is truly one of a kind. That is not to be trifled with and it is certainly not to be bargained with. Yet our culture teaches us to do exactly this from the time we are quite small. (pause)

There is a fairy tale that describes this state; one that first appeared in the middle ages when humanity was on the cusp of the age of enlightenment, as rudimentary mechanization was just dawning. The story was finally collected and added to all the other Fairy Tales by the brothers Grimm. It is called “The Handless Maiden”.

I recount now the version as shared by Robert Johnson in his book, “The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden”. Listen:

There was once a miller who grinded grain for his village for as long as one could remember. He worked hard, turning the millstone by hand and transforming natural grain into a civilized product, flour. It was laborious work and has been so for as long as anyone could remember.

One day, the devil appears and says, “For a fee (have you noticed that every Satanic offer begins this way) for a fee, I will show you how to grind your grain with much less effort and much faster.” The Miller is immediately intrigued and makes a bargain with the devil. Certainly, anything that takes less work and gives greater output is beyond reproach. But the fee? What stands in back of the mill.

The Miller presumes the devil means the old tree that stands behind the mill, something quite worthless and a very small price to pay for so handsome an improvement to his life.

So the devil brings his mechanical expertise and connects the millstone to a water wheel so that the force of the stream running by the mill turns the stone effortlessly. The mill is now operating with its enhanced capacity, and truly it turns without effort, producing many more times flour than ever before.

The miller is delighted; the miller’s wife is busy with the extra income from the mill, and the miller is exploring what to do with his free time.

Easier, faster, more. It is the great seduction for the contemporary mind.

The miller is so pleased with his newly expanded life that he conveniently forgets that there is a price to pay. He is therefore surprised when the devil appears again some time later to demand his fee. The miller goes with the devil to get the old tree in the back of the mill but is horrified to find that his daughter is standing there and the devil claims her as his price. But, as the story goes, the girl had kept herself sinless and her hands clean, so that the devil is unable to take her. Enraged, he chops off the girl's hands and takes those.

A most terrible thing has happened! A technological advance has been won at the expense of the young feminine – that is at the expense of a feminine value, a heart value, a relational value of warmth – that which is most precious – a piece of one's very soul. (Pause)

It is a bargain that is made many times a day by us all – the trading away of a deep feeling value to buy some practical advance. We do it every time we give up our trip to the gym to get more done at the office, every time we give up a week-end of camping to work on that project that will get us that new gadget, every time we agree to more commuting on the freeway so that we miss being able to sit and watch the sunset with one we love – all in exchange for some practical goal.

This is the miller's bargain. And when done as a complete way of life, this is also the throwing of what is holy to the dogs, our pearls before swine to be trampled. It is legion today and so deeply ingrained in our mentality that we fail to see it as a devil's bargain. Like the Miller, who forgets that a price must be paid for his mill's increased efficiency, we think we can get practical advances that will make us more comfortable at no cost.

But practical advancements always come with a price. And, now, in many ways, they are also a modern necessity. I am certainly thankful for that surgeon who gave up a lot of sunsets in order to learn how safely how to remove my infected appendix when I was 21 years old or I wouldn't be here.

Our problem is not practical advancements. Our problem is that we don't recognize that they cost us. There is no such thing as a practical advance without a cost. And we get little or no incentive from the culture in which we live to pay attention to this. And even if when we *do* pay attention, honoring and nurturing these pearls – these heart values in us and others, is given little or no standing.

The good news is that the miller's daughter does eventually get her hands back by doing a rather impractical thing – wandering aimlessly in the woods – the impetuous Esau and the manipulator Jacob both end up receiving blessings from God. And Jesus helps us to rediscover the sacred, to honor our pearls – to be more discerning about how we share these precious gifts of personhood.

For he gave us his church... the place where we can fall down, but get back up. The place where we can bring our tarnished pearls to people who will help us polish them and take better care of them, who will indeed honor them in ways that help *us* honor them. The good news is that with God it's all grace and not matter how much we have profaned the Holy, Christ, the crucified one is there, waiting to forgive and help us make it right again.

What can be more profane, after all than the practical act of Pilate condemning Jesus to death on a cross simply to quiet an angry mob? Yet Jesus died willingly. He then rose and seeks us still. That is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for the reminder today that in the outer world there is no such thing as getting something of value without paying the price with a piece of souls. Help us to invest our pearls in your body, the church, and in places where your precious values are needed the most.

And now, bless these gifts that may proclaim your precious pearl, the gospel to a world so often lacking in good news of any kind. We pray in Christ's name, amen.

Resources:

Timothy Merrill, *Homiletics Magazine*, July 10, 2011.

Robert A Johnson, "The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden", Harper Collins, New York, York. 1993