

Gracious Choice
Genesis 25:21-25
August 6, 2023
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²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, since she was unable to have children. The Lord was moved by his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²² But the boys pushed against each other inside of her, and she said, "If this is what it's like, why did it happen to me?"

So, she went to ask the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her,

*"Two nations are in your womb;
two different peoples will emerge from your body.
One people will be stronger than the other;
the older will serve the younger."*

²⁴ When she reached the end of her pregnancy, she discovered that she had twins. ²⁵ The first came out red all over, clothed with hair, and she named him Esau. ²⁶ Immediately afterward, his brother came out gripping Esau's heel, and she named him Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born.

²⁷ When the young men grew up, Esau became an outdoorsman who knew how to hunt, and Jacob became a quiet man who stayed at home. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ Once when Jacob was boiling stew, Esau came in from the field hungry³⁰ and said to Jacob, "I'm starving! Let me devour some of this red stuff." That's why his name is Edom.

³¹ Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright today."

³² Esau said, "Since I'm going to die anyway, what good is my birthright to me?"

³³ Jacob said, "Give me your word today." And he did. He sold his birthright to Jacob.

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Esau is the older brother, but Esau is not the one God chooses. Jacob is.

And there's very little about Jacob that's morally edifying. He's a hard worker and he trusts in God's blessing, but he is also a liar and extortionist.

And yet, God chose him, even before he was born. In spite of the fact that he's the younger brother, God chose him. In spite of his serious lack of character, God didn't un-choose him.

A friend once told me a story about going to see a monk who he deeply respected and was a little bit in awe of. He asked the monk, "What have you been thinking about lately?" And the monk answered, "I have been meditating on the deficiencies of God." "The deficiencies of God?" my friend asked. "Yes," said the monk. "God has a very bad memory—always forgetting our sins. God is very bad at math—leaving the 99 to save the 1. God is very wasteful—scattering seeds everywhere, no matter what the soil is like."

And here's another deficiency of God: God seems to have very poor judgement.

God chose Jacob. Even though he was weaker. Even though he was going to lie and cheat and steal his way through life. Even though he was the younger son, and everyone knew that the eldest son was the chosen son. Always.

It's hard for us to sense at a gut level how important this habit of inheritance through the older son was. But it wasn't just an odd custom. It was a linchpin of society. It's what ensured that there wasn't warfare every generation as each family sorted out how to hand on property and power. It was the basis of all relationships.

It was as fundamental and obvious to them as our assumption that first come is first served, or that the highest bidder wins. It doesn't have to be that way. What if the hungriest was served first? The one who'd been the longest without something to eat? What if it wasn't the one with the greatest resources, but the least, who won the auction? Maybe our assumptions about distributing property aren't actually any fairer than giving it all to the firstborn. But they're just how the world works.

And then God comes and does as Love does and mucks it all up. It would be one thing if we could just dismiss this story as an outlier, but this is what God's like over and over and over again all the way through the Bible. After Jacob, God chooses Joseph, a younger son and kind of an arrogant kid, as the favorite. Moses was a younger son, and a murderer.

God chose an unmarried woman in poverty to be the bearer of Love Incarnate into the world. And God chose to come not as someone mighty and powerful, but as a child who faced violence in his own country and fled as a refugee, a man who was not respected or honored, but scorned and executed. This is, apparently, God's way.

In The Message's rendering, Paul put it this way: "God deliberately chose people that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies.'"

God absolutely loved Esau. I do not doubt that. Esau grew up and prospered. But God's love wasn't content to stop there, resting on the oldest or most upright.

This turns pretty much everything upside down. When I'm picking teams for kickball, I want the strongest players and then, once they've all been chosen, the nicest. Well, who am I kidding? I was never team captain doing the choosing. I was always the kid chosen last. But you know what I mean. We work so hard to be strong enough and good enough.

And Love apparently isn't interested in that one bit.

What if we looked at the world like that? What if we assumed the most different had the most to teach? The least educated or resourced or abled were the best ones for the job? The ones who've screwed up again and again were the ones we needed to look to for guidance?

What if we looked at ourselves with those eyes? What if our places of weakness, our wounds, were in fact, the wombs of new life? Even if we're not the best or the most perfect, even if the world doesn't think we count, even and especially when we fail and fall short time and time again, God chooses us, blesses us, loves us.

We were all, *all*, created in God's image and are chosen: older brothers and younger brothers alike, convicted felon and prosecutor, migrants without papers, beautiful, proud, unapologetically queer youth, folks the world dismisses because they move or perceive or think differently, the unethically wealthy and the ones who call our church looking for just enough help to get through the month. All children of God. All chosen. All beloved.

~ Sarah W. Wiles