

# *The Trickster*

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 119:105-112; Genesis 25:19-34

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Continuing our summer series of 'Surprises and Disruptions in the Family of Faith,' we come today to the character of Jacob. And I would want to say that there is a sense that with Jacob, we have come to the heart of this entire narrative, and even a sense that we have come to the heart of the faith community of Israel and the church. As we read these stories, I'll be interested to hear what you think about this, because claiming that, with Jacob, we are at the heart of what it means to be the covenant community, is not necessarily the most flattering thing one could say.

Jacob's life is a *life of gift* and a *life of struggle*. According to this story, the two go together. One does not get the gift without the struggle, nor does the struggle come without the gift. Both of those are part of the life of Jacob, right from the get-go. In verse 21, the text says that Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebekah, were unable to have children, just as Abraham and Sarah, Jacob's grandparents, were unable to have children. Barrenness is the condition from which this family lives, human effort was unable to produce Jacob, so that Jacob's life itself is a gift from God.

And straight-away, we are told in verse 22, that Jacob's life was one of conflict. "The children struggled together within her." Which is also to say that Jacob's life was not entirely his own. Jacob had to share the womb, he had to share his life, with his brother, Esau. Now this is a hard lesson for those of us who are only children; in fact, this may be life's greatest lesson for only children, who are continually puzzled at why we should have to share. We can think the universe really ought to revolve around us!

But of course, it doesn't. There is always a brother. Or a neighbor. Or an enemy. Our life always involves the other. And what this story knows is that the presence of the brother, the presence of the other, characteristically brings struggle. As someone has said, "Where two or three or gathered, you will have a conflict."

And what this story says about Jacob is that he is ready for the struggle, even as a baby. Esau is born first, the text says, and "afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel." Jacob is a tough, scrappy fighter, even as a newborn. You would be best not to underestimate a Jacob.

This continues in the second scene in our story today, where Esau has been out in the field hunting, and comes back in, famished. While Esau was the early bird who went out to get the worm, Jacob has been at home cooking a stew. And you can feel the brotherly love in the scene, where the older brother insults his younger brother's

cooking, "Let me eat some of that red stuff." But this younger brother can give just as much as he can take, and Jacob says, "Yeah? First sell me your birthright."

And with those words, Jacob springs the trap that was laid back when these boys were in the womb. When Rebekah prayed about the struggling infants in her womb, God acknowledged and confirmed the conflict saying, "The one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." And with those words, God subverted the long-held social custom of primogeniture, the custom which provided the rights of inheritance and succession to the firstborn son. In many ways, primogeniture was a foundational pillar of the social fabric, it was just how things worked, it was how things were done. Primogeniture is written into Scripture itself, in texts like Deuteronomy 21, but the privilege of the firstborn is subverted by Scripture so often – with Isaac, with Jacob, with Joseph, with David, with the prodigal son – that the Bible seems almost to be saying that we should hold all such strict social rules with a lightness of heart. God seems to be quite ready and willing to violate social custom when necessary.

Jacob, of course, did not have to do this. Jacob could have seen his brother, his only brother, come in from the field, famished, and just given him a bowl of stew to satisfy his hunger. But of course, that wouldn't be a very good story, and in any case, this brother is not like that. Jacob saw an opportunity, and he went for it. Two chapters later, in a story that the lectionary unfortunately skips over, Jacob takes this sibling rivalry even further, and tricks his father Isaac into giving him the primary family blessing that was intended and reserved for Esau as the firstborn son. That deception will cause a violent rupture in his relationship with Esau that will haunt them both for years.

The Jacob stories are remarkable stories. What makes these stories even more remarkable is when, in Genesis 32 – in a story that we'll get to hear in a few weeks – Jacob is given a new name, and Jacob's new name is *Israel*.

Jacob is Israel.

My father, who taught Old Testament for many years at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, told me this past week that he likes to say that when Israel wrote these stories about Jacob, they were, in a very real sense, writing their own *autobiography*. In a mysterious way, Israel sees a great deal of itself in the character of Jacob.

Polarization is one of the most salient characteristics of our common life these days. Polarization seems to be evident everywhere and it is intense everywhere – over whether schools should re-open, whether and where to wear a mask, over statues and symbols and names of schools, over issues of race and economics and health care and criminal justice, and on and on and on. One aspect of this polarization is that there can often be, in many people, a kind of defensiveness about our positions and an intense

desire to *be right*. And not just to be right, but to be seen as right. We want others to see us as good and right, and so we carefully curate and preserve and defend our reputations and images as people who are right. If you're like me, you may think, "Yeah, this makes sense about *other* people, but it's different with me - I *am* right!"

What this self-defensiveness can obscure from our awareness is that we all have a shadow side, an agenda, a set of self-interests that live just outside or under our awareness, but which are influencing, and sometimes driving, our behaviors and our positions.

In its Scriptures, Israel demonstrates a remarkable capacity and commitment to remaining aware of their complexity, including their shadow sides. By identifying themselves directly – in their very name – with Jacob, whom I am calling a trickster, Israel expresses, models, and commends a high level of self-awareness in the practice of faith. You do not self-identify with Jacob - who steals the family blessing and takes advantage of your brother's hunger to obtain the rights of the first-born – in order to protect an image of yourself as the noble one. You self-identify with Jacob as a way of keeping yourself honest, keeping yourself grounded and humble and aware of your own complexity.

Israel understood that they could be deceptive and manipulative at times, that they were sinful, broken people. But they understood that God was using them, just as God used Jacob. God had chosen *them* to bring blessing to the world. In spite of their faults, and in some ways, through their faults, God would carry blessing to the world.

Israel is Jacob. Which means that the church, those of us who, as the apostle Paul says, have been grafted onto the tree of Israel, we are also Jacob. So how do you see Jacob's characteristics turning up in your life, in good ways and in less than good ways? Where do you show a kind of cunning, a shrewdness about how to make it in the world? Where are you aggressive and assertive, in getting what you want? Where can you be deceptive, willing to manipulate people and situations in order to advance your own position? Where have your actions caused ruptures with people in your life, the Esau's in your life, who may resent you now for what you have done? And how do you sense that God is using you, with all of your complexity, to bring blessing and healing to our world - our world, with all of *its* struggles – our polarization, racial injustice, contempt and scorn for those who are different?

According to these stories, God uses complicated people for God's purposes. God uses Jacob, God uses Esau, God uses the rupture in their relationship, all of it gets used to move the story of God's salvation along, building the beloved community with broken, complicated people. The same holds in our lives and in our day. To that God be all the glory. Amen.