

Delayed Gratification
6th in the Sermon Series "Faith Journeys"
Genesis 25: 19-34
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First Federated Church
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Like his parents before him, Isaac and his wife Rebekah had a difficult time conceiving a child. And, after a lot of prayer and hoping and wishing, Rebekah finally "became full with child" but her pregnancy was terribly difficult, so much so that she visited a specialist of that day, an oracle. The oracle listened to Rebekah and, I imagine, examined her before reassuring her that there was nothing wrong--other than she was going to have twins!

*Two nations, the oracle said, are in your womb,
two peoples butting heads while still in your body.*

*One people will overpower the other,
and the older will serve the younger. (The Message)*

This was a very disturbing, especially in a culture that practiced primogeniture which means that the right of inheritance fell to the eldest child.

Although they wouldn't have necessarily had a name for it, Rebekah conceived "paternal" rather than "maternal" twins for when the boys were born the first one came out of the womb all ruddy and hairy. He was named Esau which means "hairy." The second was smooth of skin but there was something peculiar about his birth. He came out of the womb with his fist firmly secured around his elder brother's heel. He was named Jacob which means "heel-grabber."

As they grew up they had very different interests. Esau was a *Field and Stream* kind of guy. He was an outdoorsman, skilled with the bow. Jacob, on the other hand, was more the *Top Chef* type. He had domestic interest and was a great cook. Unfortunately, their parents played "favorites." Isaac was partial to Esau; Rebekah to Jacob. As you might imagine, this favoritism caused continual problems in the family dynamic. Always in the background lay the words of the oracle--*Two nations are in your womb, two peoples butting heads; one will overpower the other, and the older will serve the younger.*

The fulfillment of the oracle began to come into view with today's lesson. Jacob was preparing an aromatic, mouthwatering pottage or stew. Esau had been out all day hunting. When he returned to camp he smelled Jacob's pottage. "*Give me some of whatever it is that you are cooking. It smells delicious and I'm starving.*" Jacob continued stirring before replying. "*I tell you what; let's make a trade. I'll give you some of this--nodding to the stew--"if you will give me your birthright.*" "*What good is a birthright if I starve to death?*" Esau replied. "*Deal.*"

Now the writer of the story says that Esau "despised" his birthright. That seems pretty strong. He didn't "despise" it as in "hate" it so much as he didn't appreciate it for what it was. It was a part of his future, of who he was. Kind of like a father passing from one generation to the next a family heirloom. Esau didn't really understand what he was trading away. He was willing to bargain his future for something as inconsequential

as a bowl of soup. He wanted satisfaction now and didn't care or think about the ultimate cost.

Jesus faced a similar temptation at the very beginning of his ministry. You may recall in the gospels that immediately after his baptism he was led into the desert wilderness by the Spirit where he faced three temptations. The first temptation was to turn the stones around him into bread. The second was to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and to trusty God's angels to break his fall. The third was to bow before the Tempter and rule all of the kingdoms of the world.

Through the centuries the temptations of Jesus have been understood in different ways. The early Church understood them as temptations to sin. For example, turning stones into bread was seen as *gluttony* or over-consumption, flinging himself off of the temple pinnacle was *hubris* or pride, and ruling the kingdoms of the earth was associated with *avarice* or the acquisition of wealth for its own sake.

Modern commentators note that the temptations were not bad in and of themselves. Each were things that are very desirable. They point out how easily Jesus could have justified each of them to himself, after all, they were parts of his ministry. Turning stones into bread--feeding the hungry; throwing himself off of the temple for God's angels to protect was trusting in God's Providential care; bringing the kingdoms of the earth under divine rule is what he taught his disciples to pray for--*Thy Kingdom come*. But the means to these ends--bowing before the way of the world--would poison the very things he was called to do.

In the face of the temptations, Jesus had to look deep within himself. He had to look at the long-term consequences of succumbing to the temptation to see if it was worth the price. That is true for all of us in one way or another. For example, I would hate to think that my physician "cheated" his way to the top of his medical school and cheated his or her way through all of the residency requirements. In the end Jesus decided--*knew*--that he would be giving up far more than he could ever gain.

It is a shame that Esau did not come to that same conclusion. Instead he sold his birthright for a bowl of pottage!

In our faith journeys we are often tempted with the quick fix, the expedient, the easy, and the fastest, rather than the right thing. We are a *Game Boy* people worshipping a chess-player God, a microwave people trying to hurry a God more attuned to a slow-cooker.

In the Church we are in what is called the season of Lent. During Lent, tradition says that this is a time for spiritual reflection. "Fasting" is one of the tools that many use in their discernment. Fasting does not, though pertain only to food and drink. We can fast in other areas of life. It may mean that we "give up" something for Lent.

While driving to church one morning last week I was listening to a radio program in which the on-air personalities were reading from a list of Vatican suggestions of what young people can give up for Lent. It included Facebook, texting, video games, I-Pods and other "newfangled" technologies. (Yes, "newfangled!") That got me to thinking about a book that I read last summer, the title of which is worth the price of the book; [How to Follow Jesus Without Embarrassing God](#) by Tony Compollo. In it he has a chapter called "How to Protect Yourself from Technology Without Becoming Amish." Tony Compollo taught sociology at Eastern University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania--the home of a large Amish community. In this chapter he tells about taking a sociology

class on a “field trip” to the home of an Amish bishop. The bishop surprised the students by telling them that the Amish do not have a problem with the “modern world.” Take electricity, for example. Many Amish families have electricity in their barns, but they will not put it in their homes. “It changes the rhythm of life. With electric lights, you don’t go to bed when you ought to, and you don’t get up when you should. And that’s just the beginning. Once you’ve got electricity, it’s not long before you are into all the things that go with electricity. You’ll have radios, televisions, stereos, and who knows what else.”

When asked what was wrong with all of those things, the bishop quickly answered, “If you have those things, they will take up all of your time, and there’s not much left to give to those in your family and to other things that matter. Why do you let your children watch television and listen to the radio? Don’t you know that sooner or later what they believe to be right and wrong is going to be controlled more by what they hear and see coming over the air than by anything they hear coming from you? We didn’t outright reject these things. We just stood back to see what happened to the families that had them. And when we saw what it did to the likes of your kind, we decided that we would just as soon not have those things happen to us.

“The same goes for automobiles. Those machines are good things, if you can keep them under control. We aren’t against riding in them. We’ll even hire people to drive us places we want to go. It’s just that we don’t think we ought to own them. Cars make it too easy for people to get away from each other, and that’s not good for either the family or community. People ought to stay home with the people they know and love, instead of wandering off to places where nobody knows who they are”

Compollo continued, “the bishop’s strongest case was made against telephones.” He pointed down to the end of the lane leading up to his farm house and called our attention to a telephone booth that stood there. “I paid the phone company extra to put that phone booth there for my use. Got nothing against phones...It’s just that you shouldn’t let those things into your house. If you do, you’ll be inviting people to interrupt you whenever they feel like it. You won’t be able to get through a meal without it ringing. When you’re talking about deep things with your children, it’s bound to interrupt. When you’re in bed with your wife, you almost can count on it sounding off. You can’t even say your prayers without it breaking in. I have that phone down there at the end of my lane for emergencies, but I’m not about to let it become an interrupter of all that I believe is sacred.” They weren’t about to give up living in the modern world and become Amish, but they had been forced to think about how so much of the technology they had accepted into their lives had led to a disruption of their lives, put them on edge, diminished the quality of their families, and lured them into hectic, lifestyles that leave them exhausted.” He concludes this chapter with these words, “You just have to work on establishing a balanced way of using the technology so that it serves you, rather than the other way around.”

Jacob was a bit of a cad. We’ll look at that more closely next week. But, be that as it may, you have to say this, he didn’t sacrifice the future for the present. As Stephen Covey noted in his groundbreaking book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People we can be so focused on the *urgent* that we neglect the *important*. Jacob took the long view of his life. Maybe that is why, before *his* story is over, he has a name change. Jacob the *heel grabber* becomes *Israel* the one who strives with God.