

## GOD'S SCANDALOUS PREFERENCE FOR THE SCOUNDREL

Genesis 25:29-34; Romans 8:1-6; Matthew 13:1-9

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At the age of 16, I experienced a profound sense of calling to be a pastor

Over the course of several weeks, I felt a great conviction swelling in my  
soul

--and when at last the force of that conviction burst -- like a thundercloud  
giving way to  
rain -- I knew the Divine had laid hold of my life in a vital, personal way

But a few years later, when I entered Clinical Pastoral Education -- the  
ministerial equivalent  
of boot camp for the soul -- I discovered my call to the ministry was not so  
pristine  
and pure as I imagined

No, my call took shape within a melting pot of very human forces

--one was my mother's probable call to the ministry that given her place and  
time,  
she could hardly acknowledge, let alone live out

Was I simply living out her unfulfilled dream?

--then there was my own deep-seated need-to-please, not to mention the  
allure of  
spiritual stardom

During this season of soul searching, I began to question my call to the ministry

Was it really from God, or just from the depths of my own twisted psyche?

--my clinical supervisors weighed in with helpful insights on the matter

But the final resolution came in the netherworld of dreams

One night, as I tossed and turned into the wee hours of the morning, a light  
shone in  
the dark night of my soul

I felt the Divine One sidle near and whisper, "Relax, Bob. Just be glad I can  
use  
conflicted, neurotic people like you. That's all I have to work with!"

--I woke with the memory of God's chuckle still sounding in my ear

And after that, I never really doubted my calling again

That was when that old rascal, Jacob, became my patron saint

Because Jacob helps me remember that the complex forces that shape us  
are  
but porous clay in the Master potter's hand

Talk about conflicted! --> Jacob was a mess!

He was already up to no good . . . in the womb!

--when his distraught mother, Rebekah, sought counsel about her troubled  
pregnancy,  
she learned that the ancestors of two nations, Israel and Edom, were  
fighting  
it out in her womb

And when at last, Rebekah delivered her twin boys, the first came out  
covered  
in a silky robe of red hair, so they named him Esau or "Red"

--and the second boy came out clinging to his brother's heel as though he  
were  
catching a ride through the birth canal

This son's given name was "Jacob," but his nickname was "The Heel"

And what a Heel he was!

Years later, when Jacob was cooking up some stew, Red came storming in,  
hot  
and sweaty from a hunt

--the hunt turned up no game and Red was famished so he asked his kid  
brother  
for a bowl of stew

Jacob agreed to give Esau some stew, but only in return for his brother's  
birthright,  
meaning the right of the eldest son to lead the clan and inherit a double  
share  
of the estate

--his stomach rumbling, Esau struck the deal and bartered away his future

Interestingly, the Bible doesn't fault Jacob for conning his brother

The Bible chides Esau for "despising his birthright"

--and here we brush up against one of the great scandals about God, at  
least the God of  
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel

And that is God's decided preference for scoundrels

--and not just in this story but throughout the Bible and all the way to Jesus  
who  
preferred "tax collectors and sinners" to high-brow religious types

So why does God choose Jacob, the Heel, to carry forward the Divine Promise  
to  
bless all the world through Abraham?

Because Jacob has something Esau lacks:

--Jacob has grit and gumption, determination and drive and passion for a  
cause,  
a future that matters

I've been pondering monuments of late, as perhaps have many of you

Despite being a son of the south -- NC born and NC bred -- I'm glad to see  
those  
Confederate monuments coming down

--most of them were erected at the height of white supremacy in the Jim  
Crow South

They were erected to keep black people in their place so its past time for  
them to go

But I *am* troubled by the clamor to wipe out all vestiges of Jefferson and  
Washington and  
others of our nation's founders

After all, these leaders didn't launch a disastrous war that claimed 600,000  
American  
lives in defense of a diabolical practice

--No, the Founders powerfully articulated high ideals, even if they failed in  
tragic  
and shameful ways to reach them

For it was their revolutionary manifesto that "All men are created equal and  
endowed  
by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" -- that in time would  
defeat  
their own misguided attempts to keep women, poor whites, and  
enslaved  
Africans in bondage

As the African-American pastor and author, Bryon Williams, powerfully  
argued on  
last Sunday's op-ed page of the *Winston-Salem Journal*,

"America has been made better, moving closer to its stated  
commitments, because those (too long excluded) held the nation  
accountable to its original commitments.

"(And) in every movement of change, the Declaration was the moral  
touchstone that legitimized those efforts"

--so it is that the cause to which you give yourself needs to be bigger  
and  
better than you

No, Jacob was not a paragon of moral virtue

Like all of us, he was a study in personal and family conflicts, moral failings,  
and  
hopeless contradictions

--but he had a divine compulsion his impulsive, shortsighted brother lacked

Namely, the willingness to commit himself to a cause, a calling, a charge,  
a mission  
arising from Something -- or Someone -- bigger than himself

--and *that* is what God used use to change him for the better

And as for scandal, who does Jesus calls to follow him in the Gospels?

The pristine and perfect, the elites and the self-satisfied?

--No! The hungry, the lame, the blind, the downtrodden and the oppressed,  
the  
outcasts and the sinners

In short, the people *who have no hope save him!*

--then in a journey called discipleship, he transforms them into people  
whose hearts  
grow large with a love like his own:

A love not just for insiders, but outsiders, not just for one's own family  
but for  
God's family, not just for one's friends but for one's enemies

Thus, becoming a Christian is not about reaching some pinnacle of moral or  
spiritual perfection

Becoming a Christian means entrusting yourself -- in all your flawed,  
conflicted  
humanity -- to Jesus

--and doing your best to follow him

The story is told of a man who gave up on the church a teenager

He found the church much too fussy about who was welcome and who was  
not  
--and much too hypocritical in preaching a Gospel it failed to live

But then, in mid-life, this gentleman hit upon a crisis that left him floundering

He longed for a sense of spiritual connection and community

--so one Sunday morning, he screwed up his courage and wandered into a  
church

At that moment, the congregation was reciting its Prayer of Confession

"We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have  
left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health  
in us."

--hearing this, the man smiled in recognition

"Finally!" he exclaimed to himself: "This sounds like my kind of crowd"

You prayed a similar prayer of confession earlier in this service

Because praying that prayer means you are coming to see . . .

--that God's scandalous preference for the scoundrel means God's  
scandalous preference . . .  
for *you*

Yes, Jacob is my patron saint

He helps me remember God doesn't require or expect perfect people

--just risk-takers willing to trust in a grace and a God so much bigger than  
themselves

As E. Stanley Jones answered, when asked by an 8-year-old girl, "Dr.  
Jones,  
what does it take to become a Christian?"

"Darling," the famed missionary-evangelist answered, "It takes you!"

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*Thank you, gracious God, for inviting us into a journey of transformation with Jesus.*

*Help us forgo a paralyzing perfectionism to take off -- just as we are --  
after him.*

*In Jesus' name we pray and hope to live, Amen.*

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