

**Family Reunion**  
**Tyrone Greenlee and Marc Mullinax**  
**Genesis 25:21-34**  
**July 10, 2011**

**Tyrone:** The passage in Genesis that is our scripture basis for tonight is full – full of deception, family dynamics, vengeance, theft. It would make a good daytime TV drama or reality series.

I wasn't sure how we would make this passage work in terms of the topic we chose tonight. We want to have a conversation about privilege – the privilege that racism affords those in our society whose skin is white, and the reverse of that privilege – what happens to people of color in our society around the issue of privilege.

At first glance, the story of Jacob and Esau does not seem to lend itself to the subject of privilege very easily. However, as I studied the passage this week, there were several things that rose to the top of my consciousness. The first was sadness – sadness that these brothers, these twins, these two parts of the same whole, were broken apart over the issue of birthright. These two sons of God, and sons of Isaac and Rebekah, lost sight of who they were and who and what they should be to each other – over the issue of who was to receive the blessing from their father, Isaac.

Now, I understand what a huge and important thing the blessing and birthright was. The blessing was not only for the favored son but for the generations that would follow him. It was understandable that Jacob would plot to get this blessing and that Esau would be enraged – eventually – about having his birthright stolen.

But I tell you, I believe there is another, parallel story here. The real story for us as people of faith is that Jacob and Esau lost sight of their identities and as a result lost their relationship as members of the same family. I believe that race and racism in our society can lead to the same kind of loss of identity and relationship among the body of Christ. I believe that the privilege and oppression of racism can cause us as a body of believers to disconnect from ourselves and from each other.

It was as a result of my work with Christians for a United Community that I became aware of the issue of identity as it relates to racism – how white folks can internalize the superiority that a racist society can convince them of, and how people of color can internalize the negative messages embedded in the oppression we face. I was literally horrified as I began to understand the ways my opinion of myself – how I saw myself in the world and how I related to others, black and white – was shaped by my internalized feelings of worthlessness and inferiority.

***Tyrone: “I was literally horrified as I began to understand the ways my opinion of myself was shaped by my internalized feelings of worthlessness and inferiority.”***

The greatest pain came for me from the sadness of knowing I had been living my life in an inauthentic way – less than the brilliant, unique child of God that I – that we all – have been created to be. I had allowed the language of oppression – that black folks are inarticulate, lazy, prone to crime, etc. – to invade not only my thoughts but my opinion of myself and my opinion of other African Americans. And the further tragedy here is that these feelings of internalized oppression are replicated in my African American brothers and sisters. I see evidence of it every day.

Living in a racist society is not just about dealing with the institutional, larger societal manifestations of racism, but also about the interpersonal and intrapersonal effects of the disease. I not only deal with my issues around stereotypical thinking and prejudice towards people whose skin is a different color than mine, I also war with the negative messages the society sends me about who I am.

As many of you know, I work part-time at a charter school here in Asheville, primarily with middle-school students. A little over a year ago, one of the students shared with me that he thought I talked like a white person. This simple statement from him really bothered me – and it bothered me that it bothered me.

I was disturbed by the statement for two reasons. First, it was a concern to me that this young man obviously believed that to be able to use the English language well was the exclusive domain of white people. But I was also troubled by how this simple statement sent me into the familiar downward spiral of self-doubt – questioning my speech pattern and use of language and wondering if I was

unconsciously denying my race or running from my heritage, or if the way I spoke was some kind of response to the pressure I felt from society to be less “black” in my speech and appearance. The insidious aspect of internalized oppression is that there are no easy answers – and that the pain and self-doubt can be triggered very easily.

If I am unable to live fully into my identity as a child of God as a result of racism; if I am unable to see my white brothers and sisters as part of the same body of Christ that I inhabit; if I am unable to completely engage with other believers because I don’t believe I’m worthy or I don’t have enough trust because they don’t look like me; if our ability to minister to each other and bear one another’s burdens, or to encourage each other and lift each other up as the body of Christ is in any way short-circuited because of racism –then there is a serious, spiritual wrong in existence that must be corrected.

Jacob and Esau’s birthright battle led to threats of murder and years of separation and a seemingly irresolvable breach in their relationship as brothers, as twins. And the racism that we all live with every day can seem just as permanent. However, the hope, the joy, the salvation for Jacob and Esau, and for us today, is that they were not condemned to live forever in that place of separation and loneliness. And indeed they did not.

Verses 1-4 of Chapter 33 of Genesis are about the reconciliation of these two brothers:

*Then, in the distance, Jacob saw Esau coming with his four hundred men. Jacob now arranged his family into a column, with his two concubines and their children at the front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. Then Jacob went on ahead. As he approached his brother, he bowed low seven times before him. Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him affectionately and kissed him. Both of them were in tears.*

The second piece of this parallel story in Genesis is, I believe, about the power of forgiveness and the practice of reconciliation. In chapter 33, we see a reconciliation of the twins after many years. Jacob is repentant and willing to make amends with gifts for the birthright deception, and Esau, who at that time was in the dominant position, was willing to practice forgiveness and forget the pain of his loss of birthright.

The challenge for us today is to examine racism through the lens of our spirituality – and to allow the principles of forgiveness and acceptance to heal our wounds. We need to see ourselves fully as children of God – members of the body of Christ – which is indeed our ultimate identity. But before we can offer up the pain and scars of racism to our God, we must first understand and admit them – to ourselves and to others. The work of racial reconciliation is not easy. The issues of privilege and internalized oppression are complex. But they must be addressed if we are to experience a true family reunion.

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The joy here is that we don’t have to figure any of this out alone. God understands racism way better than I do – and is standing ready to heal me and comfort me and help me navigate the frightening waters of my inner demons. God is here – ready and willing – to heal the body and bring us together. We just have to ask. We just have to offer up our fears and pains and the things that go bump in the night in our minds. The power to heal – to live our lives free from shackles of racism – can and will lead to the ultimate family reunion.

I close with the words of a poem written by Arthur Waskow:

*We are the generation between the fires  
Behind us the flame and smoke  
That rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima;  
Before us the nightmare of a Flood of Fire,  
The flame and smoke that consume all earth.  
It is our task to make from fire not an all-consuming blaze  
But the light in which we see each other fully.  
All of us different,*

*All of us bearing One Spark.  
We light these fires to see more clearly  
That the earth and all who live as part of it  
Are not for burning.  
We light these fires to see more clearly  
The rainbow in our many-colored faces.*

*Blessed is the One within the many  
Blessed are the Many who make one.*

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**Marc:** My name is Jacob. "Heel-grasper." I grasp, therefore I am.

At family reunions, they still talk about that birth of mine ... me working my way out of my mom, holding on for dear life to my brother. Heck, no way was I going to let *him* go unchallenged. Heh! I guess it was quite the sight.

That sorta stamped my character, they say. Look at my body; it's pretty soft except for these hands of mine. They are strong, full of callouses. For I am The Grasper. Wanna see my tattoo? It's a heart, and inside the heart is the word *Ropeburn*.

And so what of it?!? You get out of life only what you grab. If you don't look out for yourself, who will?

My mom, she gets this. She and I stay in the tents all day, talking, planning. Conspiring, even. Don't get over to Dad's tent much. Don't go out with brother Esau on his hunting "expeditions." He thinks he's some manly man, but all his testosterone's poisoned his point of view. It's just him and Dad, Dad and him. Yeah! Right!

But the real action's here in the tent ... just Mom and me. And we talk, she and I. Boy, do we talk! She tells me how it's gonna be. She helps me see things that aren't there yet. She's good to me.

Esau's got no future. He doesn't watch out for himself. Look at how easily he bartered away his birthright to me. He ain't got no sense! And now, look what I've got! I mean, I'm bustin' here! I am the man. THE man!! And if Esau hasn't got enough sense to keep his head about him, then he deserves whatever he gets. If it wasn't me that got that birthright, then who knows who he mighta sold it to.

Family. The birthright stays in the family, this way. I mean, *he* wasn't gonna protect it. He's dangerous to us. He needed my intervention. I'm the one who deserves it.

My name is Jacob, too. I got entitlements, therefore I am.

Some people got issues. I got entitlements. I have won the lottery five times over: Unbelievable and well-nigh impossible genetic and social accidents put a full flush of lottery tickets in my birth-hand. Drawing these cards, I have won the SuperJackpot: A U.S. citizen in the American Empire of the 20th/21st century; a heterosexual where this is not questioned; a white person where this is not questioned; a male where I can go most of the time without being questioned; and super-educated.

Rarely has history and the genetic grinder produced such a winning combination as that which came my way. And so I stay in my tent, seeking to conspire to hold on to ... I mean *develop* these cards. If I don't, who will?

Like Jacob, nurtured from birth by a parenting culture which conspired to grasp, I have been nurtured – so much and so often in this white, Southern, homophobic, color-phobic, diverse-phobic society that I think it is my second-nature. I have been nurtured to think that my privileges are my nature, that my gifts belong to me. They are *my* birthright!

***Marc: "I have been nurtured to think that my privileges are my nature, that my gifts belong to me."***

And so, can you feel with me my entitlements to the privileges of my race and region and orientation? I am normal here. I mean, a bow tie on me and I can get access just about anywhere. DWB (Driving While Black)? I don't *ever* think so. No one second-guesses me. Guessing and hoping about how a bank sees me, or a police officer views me, or how a Human Resources Department weighs me, or

wondering about what will happen if I want to live in that zip code, or this neighborhood ... these do not ever concern me.

I can use my energy and money for optional things, not necessary things. I have got so many options, I don't know how to choose anymore. The blessings just flow and flow.

No one can accuse me of being racist. I never say the N-word. Never. However, I still seethe at the suggestion someone made a while back: that racism meant I use my lack of color to decide where I would not live, and I use those wild cards I mentioned to keep aloof, stay above the hurt. That all these cards are just a house of cards. They are not tickets, but prison sentences, blinders. When will that truth hurt enough?

My name is Jacob. I grasp, therefore I am. I want to keep this jackpot. I don't want to interrogate the myths that made me rich. I live within these cards' bubble, livin' the reactive life. Keeping, conserving, grasping, and stealing ever ... so ... slowly the birthrights and claiming them as my own.

Don't believe me? African-descended people will know exactly how long they were enslaved, the first time in human history ownership was based just on skin color. Ask the Japanese in America, during World War II; ask the Cherokee just how long that Trail of Tears was, and how long it still goes on. People holding the cards, the power, the social position, rarely confront such questions. My cards, I suspect, are a house of cards, an illness ... and hardly an insurance against all kinds of ills, illnesses, ill winds, ill threats, and all other unwelcome things.

My name is Jacob. I grasp. I dwell with other graspers on a ship called *Titanic*. There's an iceberg ahead. Seen it too late. We got to stop this boat from hitting the iceberg. How?

June 26, 2000; 10:19 in the morning; White House. This is the moment and the place that race died. The mapping of the entire human genome was complete.

Race is not genetic. It is no longer real. At no level is there any difference worth negotiating between the so-called races. Oh, you can trace some genetic dispositions to regions of the world, but race is a fabrication, a joker wild card we have infused with false meaning. Head size, skin color and other cards we are dealt: These are a test for our love at best, and a fabrication at worst. The concept of race is just not there. The most important fact on this earth is our humanity.

If you read off your chromosomes' base pair sequences, at one per second, it would take a century to spell off your genome. Tyrone, if I read off my chromosome map at the same time you did, we would spell things out exactly the same for the first 17 minutes. Then we'd be the same for another 17 minutes, and then there would be one letter difference again.

I am a mongrel. But how "white" am I? How black are you, Tyrone? One more time: How did we make this a difference worth fighting over? How much do I care? *That's* the real story; it's not genetic. I guess the question is whether my spirit is black enough to be seen as kindred.

Fast-forward Jacob's story, and he turns out alright. He has a dark night of the soul. He's brought down low, mostly by his own legacy, and one night he wrestles with his demon, his God; you can read about this in Genesis 32. Jacob gets a new name. He goes from The Jacob the Grasper to Israel the God-wrangler. He wrangles with God about his past, his inglorious past, which from birth was a history of grasping, of grabbing, of assumed privilege. He learns an important lesson, though.

With Faulkner, he learns that the past is never past. It's not even past. You still got the residue of the past clinging like an aroma to your self. You think you may be through with the past, but the past is not through with you.

And so our Jacob gets a daily reminder of his God-wrangling encounter. He limps the rest of his life, an ever-present reminder – much better than a tattoo, don'tchathink? – that he is a marked man.

If whites have inflicted the wound of racism upon blacks, the cost has been that we would receive the mirror image of that wound into ourselves. I limp, especially when we vanilla-colored people still cripple the chocolate-colored people and then blame them for limping. We heteros limp when we blame the gays for holding up mirrors to our own insecurities. It is time to release this heritage, this escrow account of hate, and bring forth the promissory note of freedom for all, rooted in a common future.

May you find the wisdom to listen to your illness,  
ask it why it came,  
why it chose your friendship,  
where it wants to take you,  
what it wants you to know,

what quality of space it wants to create in you,  
what you need to learn to become more fully yourself,  
that your presence may shine in the world.

And so, my name is Jacob Grasper, and my name is Israel God-wrangler. Some days I grasp, sitting alone in my tent, and some days I wrestle with God, and limp. Depends on which name I feed, which legacy I give oxygen to.

White, heterosexual, Southern American ... these are poor places to hang the hat of one's identity. We are better than this. Love, sooner or later, forces us out of our false connections to this time and place. This disorientation is how we become family. 'Fore we was born we was all kin. When we dead we'll be kinfolks again. We are potential love animals, wrenching and floundering in our larval envelopes, trying to fling off our bestial past.

Question: Can I sing the blues? Do I know the tune? Can I be still, and know, that this card of racism is always in my hand? How can I anguish through the hopeless loss? How can I put the ghosts of our racist past to rest? How can a legacy of eugenics, Jim and Jane Crow, chocolate inner cities and vanilla suburbs be neutralized? When can we forget that being straight or crooked or whatever is not who we are meant to be, and be held as cards ourselves by a divine hand, transformed into the royal flush that we are?

Theologically, and biblically, we lament. Lament is the emotional place where we have no power anymore, no more cards to play. We recognize the terrorism, the destruction, the utter devastation visited upon us, without trying to interpret it. Just let it cry. Let Jim Crow and Jane Crow, and the eugenics victims and the Japanese and the Cherokee and the immigrants and the bashed gays cry. Sing the blues. Lament without interruption. Without trying to fix anything.

Let the card players throw down their false-defining cards and pick up the sheet music of lament. Listen to your illness. Celebrate the pain, the separation, the injustice with a song of lament. Celebrate the hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. Sing a praise song to mongrelisation, to the mélange, hodge-podge, the bit of this and the bit of that that we are.

This is how newness enters the world. The lament is a love-song to our mongrel selves. If there is no race, then we all are black and brown and white, gay and bi and straight and trans, leaking into one another, like flavors when you cook. May we learn new recipes, new card games to play together, new sheet music from which we may sing.

Amen.