

Hinde Street Methodist Church

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Katherine Fox

There are times when God calls us to be like Esau, and sell our birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Let me explain.

A few weeks ago James preached powerfully on how God was with Hagar in the wilderness, outlining its implications for structural racism and white privilege. As I heard Sarah cast out Hagar I wanted shout "don't do it". When that didn't work I wanted to condemn Sarah. God had promised her that her son would begin a great nation. Did she think earthly rules of inheritance would overrule God's promise?

In our journey through Genesis today we get to Jacob and Esau and why Jacob is listed as Jesus' ancestor and not Esau.

The story is ridiculous. This sale of birthright does not stand up to scrutiny and could easily be dismissed as a joke. Was Esau in his right mind, with full knowledge of the implications? Were there any witnesses to the alleged oath?

Dig a little further, and it is not the only ridiculous story in the genealogy of Jesus.

In Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's gospel, five women stand out. They have dubious sexual relationships along with an element of the ridiculous in determining who inherits.

Tamar marries Judah's elder son. He displeases God and dies. Under the law, her brother-in-law should marry Tamar and have children so the family line continues. However, if Tamar has sons, they will inherit from Judah at the expense of her new husband. So he makes sure she doesn't get pregnant. He dies. Judah believes Tamar is cursed so does not order his third son to marry her. Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, has sex with her Judah, her father-in-law, and obtains his staff and ring. Pregnant, her family threaten to burn her until she produces Judah's staff and ring proving he is the father. Her actions ensure the line of inheritance isn't broken. But it's ridiculous she had to do this.

Rahab is a prostitute who takes in two spies and enables the Israelites to conquer Jericho and kill its citizens. Perhaps we are told she is a prostitute in order to explain why she had her own house, or why she lived in the city wall and could smuggle the spies out of the window in a basket. Perhaps it is because she is accepted only for sex she helps the spies, or it's the least worst alternative. Whatever the case, she is in the genealogy. But it is ridiculous her place comes from smuggling people out of a window in a basket.

Ruth marries an Israelite but her husband and father-in-law die. She is left to go with her mother-in-law to find someone to marry so her mother-in-law can claim her property rights. A story of kindness and welcoming a stranger. But it is ridiculous that Naomi and Ruth have to go to these lengths to claim their property rights.

Bathsheba, in contrast does very little. David sees her bathing, has sex with her and goes to ridiculous lengths to conceal that he is the father. Bathsheba, like Sarah, manoeuvres to ensure that her son, Solomon, becomes king to protect their future.

Matthew's gospel makes clear that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and that Joseph knows he isn't the father. Isn't it a bit ridiculous that Matthew's gospel spends the first sixteen verses explaining who Joseph is related to, only to explain Joseph isn't the father?

Here we have eight stories with enough of the ridiculous to make us wonder why they are being presented to us in this way.

The tone I've taken in describing important, founding stories in the bible might have made you feel uncomfortable. Is ridiculous really the appropriate word to describe people chosen by God, Jesus' ancestors? I've chosen it because it highlights how they challenge how we might think founding stories go. Ridiculous highlights how this isn't the way things are supposed to be. I use it to help point us to what the bible might be telling us for today.

I think these stories call us to:

1. look at the foundational stories we tell to ensure we aren't editing out the parts that don't go as we think they ought
2. be determined to find out about what really happened in our foundational stories
3. be prepared to break with the patterns of the past

The stories we tell

We might think that we have come a long way. We protect the widow and her children without relying on a brother-in-law to marry her. Women and men have equal rights to inherit. Some of us think we can make our own way in life without relying on the bank of Mum and Dad. Have we really come so far?

The trouble is we often don't know how what we inherit came into our possession.

Those of us who have safe jobs and own houses might think that we have achieved security through our own hard work. We might have forgotten those:

- who provided food so that, unlike Esau, we didn't sell our future for a meal today
- who jostled and schemed to protect our future interests like Sarah and Bathsheba

How easy it is to forget that churches like us used to step in, and in many places still do, to provide a place to learn, a meal and teachers.

Do we know about the histories and genealogies of the universities, banks and institutions founded on the inheritance of government compensation for slave owners at abolition? Do we know what we have gained where we haven't had to counter discrimination? Or is our experience like cycling into a tail wind? We don't realise why today our journey is easier.

Where people want to point out what we've missed from the official genealogy, they face being accused of re-writing history. Like the bible, we need to ensure we do not edit out the dubious bits in our origins.

Be determined to find out

Secondly, these stories of inheritance call us to be determined to find out why things are the way they are. If we don't, we are re-writing history.

Did you think Esau rash? Or did you hear that Esau's Dad loved him because he liked game and Esau was a good hunter, while his mother loved his brother? Perhaps Esau thought he might as well sell his inheritance. Perhaps he was tired of having to hunt game for his father to receive his love, and a mother who only loved Jacob.

I knew Churchill's history, but only when I passed workers trying to scrub the phrase "was a racist" from his statue did I realise I had never considered his views on race.

My team booked just another meeting room for a visit from the Pakistani Finance Minister, failing to notice it was the India Office Council Chamber, the room where our predecessors used to rule his country.

Recently a colleague described how he was exhausted from continually trying to highlight racism to us while also dealing with the impact of that racism on him. It reminded me of a conversation with

my line manager about why the reasonable adjustments for my disability still weren't in place. People get interested when I raise systemic problems like no step free access to meeting rooms or no assistive technology on an IT system. They move on to other things, I chase the outstanding queries. I'm tired from coping without the adjustments and all the chasing and give up. Six months later something happens and people turn to me for answers on why I still don't have those adjustments.

Tre Johnson, in a recent article entitled: "When black people are in pain, white people just join book clubs", writes: "I'm caught in a time loop where my white friends and acquaintances perform the same pieties over and over again."

He concludes: "The confusing, perhaps contradictory advice on what white people should do probably feels maddening. To be told to step up, no step back, read, no listen, protest, don't protest, check on black friends, leave us alone, ask for help or do the work — it probably feels contradictory at times. And yet, you'll figure it out. Black people have been similarly exhausted making the case for jobs, freedom, happiness, justice, equality and the like. It's made us dizzy, but we've managed to find the means to walk straight."

In early March I worked from home and dialled in to meetings. I was shocked at how I couldn't hear what people said, couldn't judge when to make a point, was forgotten. Now everyone is forced to work from home we've suddenly worked out how to include one another. Why didn't we do this for colleagues regularly working from home before then?

Now we are all worshipping remotely we are recognising how much easier it is to include some people. Why weren't we listening to the stories of those who would spend hours waiting for transport, who expended limited energy and mobility on the commute to church, who were regularly absent from worship as they were at work?

We need to be determined for those like Esau who are tired and have given up. We need to want to see what is already being handed down to people in front of our eyes. When it is in our interests to give up, we need to stop giving up for those who don't have that option.

Be prepared to break with the patterns of the past

Thirdly, we need to be prepared to break with patterns of the past that need to be broken. To be confident that God can break through the ties we think bind us, the systems we don't notice that set our course from birth. This is not re-writing history. If we are saying to ourselves, 'how can we sing the Lord's song in this strange present land?' it is asking God to teach us a new song for a new land.

The letters to the early church in the New Testament describe new ways of looking at inheritance, perhaps taking the hint from all those Old Testament accounts of ridiculous inheritance. We heard from Ephesians how we are adopted through Jesus Christ, who was there from the start. It is through Jesus Christ we have obtained an inheritance, not through who we were born to or which order we were born or what rights we gain from birth.

This is Jesus' genealogy but is also an account of God making and keeping promises, covenants. As Hebrews says, it is by faith Abraham acted, by faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. Not by birthright. "For this reason [Jesus] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant."

This is really why I think we need to become a bit more like Esau. To be prepared to sell what means nothing in exchange for what we need now. Those ridiculous stories remind us that God's promise is stronger than human inheritance or birthright. We should take the hint, the biblical nudge, about the value we place on what has been handed down when it causes such absurdities. We should pray that all may know the riches of God's glorious inheritance.