

The Doer and the Doner

Genesis 25: 19-34

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**June 7, AD 2015
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Robert Penn Warren was one of the greatest southern authors. He was the nation's first poet laureate and spent several years teaching at LSU. For his ginger hair, Warren's friends called him "Red." Warren began the volume of poetry which won his third Pulitzer Prize with a piece called, "American Portrait: Old Style." Warren recalled meeting up with a boyhood friend after "sixty years had blown like a hurricane past." They talked about how as kids they had played baseball and spent hours in the woods pretending to hunt buffalo. But all their relating had been in the past. Soon they ran out of things to say. As the conversation faded, his friend said suddenly, "But [Red], what makes a man do what he does-- Him living until he dies!" (1)

In the poignancy of the time passing, do you ever wonder if there is any coherent thread to your life? Is there any story unfolding which has a purpose, and an acceptable ending? Think of all the people you have known, brothers and sisters with whom you shared your youth, now gone, or far away. How rare to see lives get woven back together! The friend of childhood, the best friend to whom you swore unending loyalty: where is she, or he, now? Reconciliations and partings, new beginnings and slow endings. What makes people the way they are? "What makes a man do what he does, him living until he dies?"

This morning we begin a three week series on the lives of two men, Jacob and Esau. One would go on to be called Israel, the man who strives with God. He would be one of the great fathers of the people of God. The other would also grow to be wealthy and powerful though his descendants would be enemies of Israel. We will see, though, how both men change and grow as the LORD our God works in them through the years.

You remember the beginning of the story. The LORD I Am called Abraham to leave his home and travel to a land known simply as "the place that I will show you." Abraham was promised that he would be blessed with land and children more numerous than the stars. Through Abraham, all nations of the earth would be blessed.

As you recall, decades passed between the promise and its fulfillment.

Sarah was barren. Finally, in her ninetieth year, she conceived a son. They named him Isaac, which means "laughter." For they had laughed with disbelief and joy to see the son of promise born at last.

Now we skip several great stories to find that Isaac in his adulthood married his beautiful cousin Rebekah. He loved her. But she, too, was barren. Isaac prayed to the LORD. Again there was a delay, but this time the chosen couple had only to wait 20 years in faith! Rebekah conceived twins. There would be children who would become a great nation and through whom God would bless the world.

In the Bible, the perspective of the story switches at this point. We get Rebekah's view. There were two babies in her womb, and they were struggling with each other. Rebekah prayed for understanding. The LORD told her, "Two nations are in your womb... one shall be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." This was news. Normally, the firstborn son was the principal heir. He received double the inheritance and the mantle of family authority was upon him. But now the LORD had chosen the younger son to be the child of promise.

There is no indication whether or not Rebekah ever told Isaac of this prophecy concerning his children.

As the children grew up, appearances did not support the prophecy that the younger one would rule the older and be the heir. For the older son Esau seemed a natural leader. He was an outdoorsman. He loved to hunt. He was strong and hairy, his father's pride and joy. Jacob, by contrast, liked to stay near the tents. He was described as a smooth man. Jacob was a momma's boy. To anyone who looked, it would seem that Esau the elder would certainly be the one with the gift of leadership, the right man to be a patriarch.

In Reynolds Price's novel, *Blue Calhoun*, the title character reached a time in his life when he spent several nights a week working in a rescue mission in Raleigh, North Carolina. He listened "to those men tell their own side of where they'd been, what they'd done and --more than half the time-- what had been done to them. You could draw a line down the midst of the mission and put up two hand-lettered signs, just *Doers* and *Doners*, and ask the men to choose their side.... In two minutes flat you'll know which ones are likely to live through the next hard freeze..." (2) Sometimes our lives are dominated by what has been done to us, sometimes by what we have seized with our own hands to do.

Jacob and Esau split pretty well down that line. Though not the way we might expect. Jacob, who seemed to do less as he stayed by the tents was actually a *Doer*; he rose and fell by the way he took his future in his own hands. Esau, who was so active as a hunter and outdoorsman was actually a *Doner*; he lived carefree until he was done to, usually by his brother. His future slipped from his grasp by the action of another.

All of us receive messages from our parents about our worth and our place in the world. We absorb as children their moods and attitudes. Quite often we receive their shadows, the parts of themselves they try to keep hidden from the world. That inheritance mixes in with our own peculiar temperaments and predispositions.

Some children grow up with a rising star soaring through them. They feel marked to succeed and do well. Some children grow up with a sense of family honor and place to uphold, an inheritance to live up to. Some take on this mantle willingly and always live to please; others run as far from it as they can until the invisible cord of spirit and blood snaps them back home.

Some children grow up with a sense that they must save their parents and siblings. They will be happy for them, because Mom or Dad has passed along, perhaps in a hidden way, the profound sadness of life. Or they will save sister or brother from bad choices. These are the children always covering for or bailing out their siblings.

And some grow up with a huge emptiness inside, a feeling of unworthiness. The drive in life is either to justify their existence by achievement, or hide from their fears by escape. Some sleep around as teens to fill the need for love they missed. Others work to exhaustion to prove they can make the grade. Some live to talk; they're born to sell, to help, to problem solve—or even to yak from the pulpit! Others have learned that staying as quiet as possible keeps your feelings from being trampled on. Some grow up with a sense of joy, an *élan* in living; others reach adulthood feeling depressed. Some relate well to everyone; others are loners. Children from the same parents can be so different. As different as the twins Jacob and Esau. There seems no accounting for it.

Many times, perhaps, we do not feel any story running through the string of days in which we live. We just go from day to day, and need to need, and before you know it, years have passed. We wonder, “Is there any common thread? Is anything happening?” But what if God were, even now, unspooling a story in you?

What would it mean to learn that the Father is already, right now, at work in your life and relationships?

Let's consider these boys more closely. Jacob is the star of this story, but I feel a lot of sympathy for Esau. Yes, he was impulsive as a youth. He acted on his appetite without thinking of the future. Esau traded Jacob his birthright, which seemed at the time a very distant and insubstantial thing. He swapped his inheritance for a bowl of hot porridge which was right before him. That seems to me a forgivable, and common, error of adolescence. I've raised two adolescent boys. They get hungry. Really hungry. Esau seems like a straightforward, guileless man. He loved his father, and he loved to hunt, to be outdoors. He desired to please his parents. But by his impulsiveness, Esau marred his future, Meanwhile, Jacob ambitiously moved forward.

We move forward to Genesis 27 and read that when Isaac had grown old and blind, he thought he was going to die soon. He wanted to give his son Esau the blessing. Now in those days a blessing was an irrevocable act of speech in which the father's authority and manhood were passed along. It could only be given once. Did Isaac know of the prophecy that Jacob the younger should be the one to inherit the family authority and thus deliberately try to skirt God's will? Or had Rebekah withheld that information? Was Isaac only doing what was right, proper and the desire of his heart? We just don't know. In any event, he sent Esau off kill some game and prepare a meal. They would eat together as part of the blessing rite.

Esau went off in all good faith that things would turn out as they should. He would honor his father and receive the blessing.

But Jacob tricked him yet again. At Rebekah's urging, Jacob dressed in his brother's clothes, which smelled of the outdoors. He put skins on his hands and neck so he would feel as hairy as Esau. Then he told his blind father Isaac that he was indeed Esau come to get the blessing.

When Esau returned home and saw what had happened, at first there was purely pain. How sad to hear him cry, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father. The story tells us he then lifted up his voice and wept loudly. Esau was a man who lived his life with optimism and trust, with a great heart. And he got burned. Esau lifted up his voice and wept for the loss. Haven't you felt for the child who seems to get the raw deal time after time? This is the child who tries but somehow misses out on the favor that goes to another. Soon, of course, Esau's hurt turned to anger, a long, smoldering grudge. Esau

determined that after his father Isaac died, he would send his brother to the same place.

Isaac did find something to say to Esau, but it was only a minor blessing. His words to Esau are especially poignant: “By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve. But it shall come about that when you become restless, you shall break his yoke from your neck.” This loss will bind Esau for years, until he, at last, is ready to shed it.

Let’s go back to Jacob. He is hardly the character I would choose for the child of the promise. Of course there is nothing wrong with staying home at the tents, or with a boy loving to cook. (After all, where would Louisiana be without our Tony Chachere’s?) But it’s a tip-off in a story like this that perhaps he was not out making his way in the world like he should. He schemed to get something that did not rightfully belong to him. Is this how God wanted the tables turned and the prophecy fulfilled? Who can say?

Jacob knew how to get what he wanted. He was convinced he deserved it; he was his mother’s favorite after all. John Sanford, in his book, *The Man Who Wrestled With God*, notes that this young Jacob had few redeeming qualities except his honesty. He was upfront about tricking Isaac. He is bold, direct, and brazen about getting what he wanted. At least, Sanford says, he owned up to the trickster he was.

It’s hardly a beginning for the man who would be the patriarch of God’s people. We still speak of the God of Jacob. But what a man to build a new creation upon! Obviously he could not remain this way. Something would have to change as he made his way in a foreign land. And we will see that God had much refining in store for him.

But what are we to make today of such a choice? Simply this: no one is excluded from the call and destiny of God by reason of unworthiness or disposition. So many of us disqualify ourselves because we are not religiously natured; we do not think or feel many holy thoughts. We have checkered pasts. So we figure God is not interested in us; our story is not a God story.

But Jacob tells us something different. God chose a man who schemed against his own twin, who betrayed his father and disgraced his mother. Jacob was a *Doer*. But God was working out a story in Jacob; he was chosen, and he would pay the full price for such privilege. This same God is telling his story in all of our

lives. God is not squeamish about what kind of raw material he gets. If Jacob would do, we will do, also.

And, God was working in Esau's life as well. He was a *Doner*. Victimized by his own appetites and bad choices, he let life happen to him. But Esau would not remain forever the victim. As we will see, something remarkable would come of his life as well. Though he got betrayed, though he stupidly lived by his stomach and his hormones rather than his brain, God had plans for Esau. If Esau would do, we will do, too.

It may be that we carry a load of shame; there may be an ache of unworthiness within us; a cart full of guilt; a trail of broken pieces of people we have hurt, or been hurt by. In our search to have our needs for love and peace of mind and satisfaction met, we may have lurched all over the road. No matter now. God can weave his story in anyone. He is working his love out in you. There is something God wants to make of your life. Whether you realize it or not, God is at work in you. He is transferring you from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom there is plenteous redemption. Seeing that will enable you to cooperate with him, and so hasten your transformation. What he does with you will affect the world. Can you see any signs of it in your past or present?

God wants to enfold the story of your life into the story of his loving work in the world. Esau and Jacob seemed to be in a mess, one by what was done to him, another by what he did. God had bigger plans for both. Can you hope and pray beyond the day to day struggle of ordinary life to trust God's bigger plans for you?

Notes

- 1) Robert Penn Warren, "American Portrait: Old Style," from *Now and Then* (New York, Random House: 1979), pp. 3-7.
- 2) Reynolds Price, *Blue Calhoun*, (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 315.