

"CLAIM YOUR BLESSING"

CLAIM YOUR BLESSING!

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Genesis 27:18-39; Luke 3:15-22

***"And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son,
the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"***

— Luke 3:22b

It must have been pretty hard on old Esau.

There he comes, shuffling up to dear-old-Dad Isaac, holding out a steaming, savory pot of stew. From the giddy grin on Esau's face, you'd think he's holding an offering to the gods. The chunks of meat in the stew couldn't be fresher — he hunted the game himself!

Esau fully expects to receive ***a blessing*** from his father. And not just ***any*** blessing: ***the*** Blessing... the death-bed Blessing... the only one that — to the people of that day — really counted.

It was something akin to a Last Will and Testament. It's the father's final wish for his eldest son, the capstone of the son's lifelong relationship with him.

By all rights, the Blessing belongs to ***Esau***, the first-born son — but, as he's about to discover, his younger brother Jacob has pulled a fast one. Moments before, Jacob crept into their father's tent ahead of him, disguised as his brother. The blind Isaac felt the goatskin wrapped around Jacob's hands — hairy, like

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Esau's. Isaac smelled campfire smoke on his son's robe — so characteristic of Esau, the outdoorsman. And so, Isaac reached out and conferred upon **Jacob** the Blessing that belonged by right to his older brother.

When Esau comes in, he discovers that he and his father have been thoroughly hoodwinked — but it's too late. The Blessing's gone out, and no power on earth can bring it back.

The words that follow after are among the saddest in all of scripture: ***"Have you only one blessing, father?"*** cries Esau, like a wounded animal. ***"Bless me, me also, father!"*** ***And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.***¹

There are some sitting here today, I'm quite sure, who have cause to weep with him. I don't know it for sure from having talked to you, but I do know enough about the messy nature of family relationships to be aware that an awful lot of people go through life craving a similar parental Blessing — one they've never received.

There can be many reasons for this. Some parents simply fail to let their children grow up. They're hyper-critical, even of their adult children. Nothing the children do is ever good enough. They blame them, somehow, for not growing into

¹Genesis 27:38.

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the type of people they wish they themselves were.

There are some, too, who were raised by people other than their own parents: other family members who took them in. Or, they're products of the foster-care system. Adoptive parents and guardians can — and often are — wonderful parental figures, knowing how to extend the Blessing, but there are some who, sadly, are simply not equipped to do so.

Sometimes it's not the parents who are at fault. Sometime it's the case that children themselves turn their backs on their families — either physically or emotionally — before the Blessing could even be offered. This past week a group of us were studying Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's the story of a young man who demands his Blessing way too soon, settling for a cheapened, monetized version of it. It's only later, after he's hit rock bottom, that he begins to realize just what it is he's given up.

In Jesus' parable, of course, everyone lives happily ever after — even, we dare to hope, the older brother, who's not so sure about the arrangement at first. The father *does* bless his wayward son: he welcomes him home with open arms. He slays the fatted calf. He lays out a feast, and invites all the neighbors. It's only possible because the son is truly repentant. He is saved by the Blessing: better late than never.

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Children, at the end of their growing-up years, need to receive the Blessing. They need it most intensely from their parents, but there are certain surrogates who can also convey it: teachers, coaches, youth leaders, members of the extended family.

The Blessing can't be packed in a suitcase... or hung in a frame on the wall... or lovingly stored in the attic, in a hermetically sealed box. It can't be held in the hands — but yet, it's an essential part of life's traveling kit. The Blessing declares to its recipient, ***"Hey, you're all right... You've done a good job... You've made me proud... You're gonna make it."***

One difficulty is that we've largely lost, in our modern culture, a ritual occasion for handing on the Blessing. There are times when the Blessing ***can*** easily be conferred: when the driver's license is earned, the diploma received, the engagement ring given. But we have no single rite of passage when the Blessing ***must*** be given.

Perhaps there are some here today who have tried, in the course of your lives, to return home. You may have done so again and again — even well into adulthood — hoping to receive the parental Blessing. But it never came. There may be some here today who have wept with Esau, who have dwelt with the prodigal in the far country — and continue to do so.

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There was a time, in the life of Jesus, when even *he* received the Blessing. All four gospels tell the story, in one way or another. It's the story of his baptism.

All four gospel-writers tell how the Holy Spirit descended like a dove from out of the heavens. All of them include the voice of God, claiming Jesus as Son. For Matthew, Mark and John, the dove's descent and the voice of God are a private, spiritual vision. (Matthew and Mark say it's Jesus who received the vision; John says it's John the Baptist.)

Luke is different. It's his version we read today. The vision, here, is not spiritual and private but physically real: the dove descends "in bodily form," and the voice booms out across the Jordan valley, for all to hear.

Whatever their differences, all four gospel-writers are united in including these two details: the descent of the dove, and the voice from heaven. That sign, and that voice, together bear the Blessing. Somehow, even Jesus — God from God, Light from Light, Very God of Very God, as the Nicene Creed puts it — needs to receive the Blessing, before setting out on his life's work.

In that, Jesus shares our humanity. Clearly, he doesn't *need* the forgiveness of sins that goes along with baptism. He wades into the Jordan as a way of identifying with us, as a way of joining our community.

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I'm told there's a Russian Orthodox belief that any two babies baptized in the same church, on the same day, are as brother or sister. Maybe that's the way it is with Jesus' baptism. He doesn't need it for himself, but he needs it to share our humanity — to fully join the human family. Somehow, in a mysterious way, Jesus at the Jordan needs to know the cleansing we have known, needs to crave the same Blessing you and I have desired.

That Blessing gives us *identity*. It's no accident that baptism has always been the sacrament of naming. When a child is baptized — and we expect to do that in worship next week — the minister repeats his name. In some times and places in Christian history, the child's name is not given, and never even mentioned, *until* the baptism. The infant has no name, until the water touches her forehead, until she is claimed as a child of God.

There's a story that illustrates this "identity" aspect of baptism. It was told by the preacher, Fred Craddock. It seems he and his wife were vacationing in the Smoky Mountains, when a distinguished older gentleman came to their table in the hotel dining room. He was, as it turned out, a celebrity: a former governor of Tennessee. When he discovered Craddock was a professor of preaching, the man pulled up a chair and said he had a story to tell him, about another preacher.

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It seems that, when the governor was born, his mother wasn't married. He never knew his father. Now that may not seem so unusual today, but in the Southland of that era, it led to — shall we say — a difficult childhood. The other kids used to bully him. They asked him when his father was coming back. Whenever he was out with his mother in public, he was painfully aware that he had but one parent.

One day, when the lad was about ten, he was in church. It was his usual practice, when the service was over, to make his way discreetly out the back door. That meant that he never had to talk to the minister, never had to share his name. On this particular occasion, though, the boy got swept up in the crowd — and before he knew it, there was the pastor, at the front door, his hand extended.

"Well, son," the preacher's voice boomed out, ***"whose boy are you?"*** He could hardly have asked a more painful question. The boy flushed and started to stammer — but before he could say anything more, the preacher (still gripping his hand) said: ***"I know!.....You're God's son!"*** He slapped him on the shoulder and said, ***"Boy, go claim your inheritance."***

The boy never forgot the incident. He never forgot the preacher's kindness in not drawing attention to his single-parent family. He never forgot the way he

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sent him out, either: ***"Go claim your inheritance!"***

Long after he became one of the most popular governors in Tennessee history, this man still delighted in telling the story of the day the preacher told him he was a child of God.

It was almost as though a voice had spoken from the heavens: ***"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*** That was the day the boy received the Blessing.

There's something else, though, the Blessing can do for us. Not only does it celebrate past achievements. It also brings about transformation for the future.

Let me tell you another story. There's an old fable, about a fabulously wealthy king. The king has a son, whom he adores. The boy is bright and handsome, perfect in every way — except for one: he has a hunchback.

This saddens the king to no end. He proclaims that a rich treasure will go to any person who figures out how to heal his boy's back.

Months and months go by, with no solution emerging. The wisest of thinkers and the most learned of scholars travel to that country from afar. But no one knows what to do.

Finally, an old, wise woman happens into the kingdom and hears about the

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problem. ***"I want nothing of your treasure,"*** she says; ***"but I do have the answer to your problem."***

The old woman directs the king to build a statue in the center of the palace courtyard — an exact replica of his son, but with one exception: its back must be perfectly straight. ***"That's all you have to do,"*** she assures him. ***"Trust God for the healing."***

The king's artisans set to work, and in no time, a beautiful sculpture has emerged from a block of marble. It stands on a pedestal in the center of the courtyard. Each day, as the little boy plays, he looks up and studies the figure in admiration. He starts to say to himself, ***"That's me! It looks exactly like me."***

Little by little, the boy's back straightens. The day comes when the king gazes out at the prince, frolicking in the garden — and realizes his son's back is totally healed. The boy's identification with the statue is so complete that he has come to believe it *is* him: straight back and all!

Yes, the power of the Blessing is a wonderful — and transformative — thing to behold!

Yet, what about the question I asked at the beginning? What about those of us who have never received it — who, for whatever reason, have gone through life,

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knowing there was something missing? Are we, in our inner lives, like the pathetic figure of Esau: standing there with a pot of steaming stew in hand, hoping to effect the vital transfer — but finding we're too late, there's nothing to be done.

The good news is, the Blessing is still available. It comes, though, not from any conventional source, but rather from the one, true source of every blessing: from our God, whom we have seen in Jesus Christ.

Most all of us have been baptized — which means we can't go out and do it again: but you and I can do as Martin Luther famously did, moistening a finger in water and tracing the sign of the cross on his forehead. "Remember, Martin, that you are baptized," is what he would say to himself, sitting on the edge of his bed just after his feet hit the floor. We, too, can remember our baptisms.

Like the baptism of Jesus, there's a powerful Blessing associated with that experience. We can celebrate the fact that, when we passed through the waters as Jesus did, we received a name... we became brother or sister to him, and to all who seek to follow him... we were offered power to transform our very lives — power we can tap into, even now: any time we repent from our sins, turn to the Lord and ask him into our hearts.

The Blessing is not **"out there"** somewhere, waiting to be sought and won, as the knights of Camelot sought the Holy Grail. The Blessing is already **right**

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here, within us. We already have it. We have only but to claim it!

"You are my son, my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

May you go from this place knowing that these mighty words apply to you; that they are yours; that you are richly blessed in Jesus Christ. No matter what you have done in this life, or failed to do, if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and seek in your heart of hearts to follow him, with you God is well pleased!

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