

## A Common Birthright

*Genesis 25: 21-26*

21 Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. 23 And the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”

24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.

26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> in 1852, Fredrick Douglas was invited to speak at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, NY. He declined to speak on the day of the fourth saying that rather than promoting the sensationalism of a holiday, he would speak on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July lamenting the irony of a nation celebrating its freedom when his people did not have such a privilege. In a speech entitled, *What to the Slave is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July*, Fredrick Douglas said, “The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me... This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*.” In his raw and truthful speech, he names that we are a nation whose birth story is full on contradictions; where one group inherits the privilege of independence, while others did not.

When we read the story in our bibles, we hear another birth story of a nation. Mother Rebekah’s womb is carrying twins. Even in utero they are wrestling for the birthright of procuring the privilege which comes with being the first born. Inside of one womb there are two nations. Only one birthright.

It seems like a potent story for what we are experiencing today. Our nation is once again wrestling over two identities; fighting over who we are and what we are to become. Over the past several months, it has become obviously clear that we are in the struggle of our generation, and for some of us, our lifetime. It has become clear that we have a leader who defends Confederate monuments with exuberance while claiming that “Black Lives Matter” banners are symbols of hate. Now, since we hang Black Lives Matter banners, it is hard for me to not take offense to his words. Our president calls the protesters marching for black lives, “bad, evil people” seeking to “end America,” while once saying those who rallied on behalf of white supremacy in Charlottesville were full of “good people.” When Colin Kaepernick took a knee in protest over police brutality, our president called him a “traitor” and said we should support NASCAR instead of the NFL. Now that NASCAR is supporting Black Lives Matter and has banned the Confederate flag, he is attacking them as well—he is going to run out of sports to condemn! Friends, the pattern of defending white America’s privileged racist agenda is right there in front of us.

Of course, this isn't anything new. Turn to the foundation of our birth story and racism is there as well—brick by brick by brick. When our constitution said, “All *men* are created equal,” it wasn't a general word for all of us. It meant white, male landowners. Only white men were considered fully human. Only white men held the birthright. And then when the first census occurred in 1790 the enslaved were not counted. Even though there were 60,000 free black people, they were not recognized as citizens—their lives did not count. That same year the Immigration Act of 1790 created a pathway of naturalization for only free white men to become citizens. Why naturalization? Because it creates citizens; and what do citizens do? They vote. You see, when our current administration says they would “love more people from Denmark” to immigrate here, they are summoning the ghosts of our history, continuing the pattern of those who believed America is to be a white nation, whose prosperous birthright belonged solely to those who are white. And the truth is, they are doing it because, historically, it works. So we find ourselves once again wrestling over who gets to decide who we are and what our nation is to become.

But remember what God whispers to mother, Rebekah? “Two peoples born of you will be divided...the elder shall serve the younger.” Now this is not how the “order” is supposed to go! Everyone knows that it is the first born who gets the birthright. Except, God is disrupting who gets the privilege. While the order of social norms claims that the first born should be favored, God favors Jacob, the second born, whose name means “to supplant.” God uses Jacob, the second born, the one without the promise of inheritance; the one without “natural rights” on his side; God uses the one without the birthright to supplant the social order. Why? Because according to the gospel, we all have a common birthright...

...to be treated as fully human. To get basic health care. To have access to clean water. To have enough to eat. To learn to read and write. To fall in love with who we love. To earn a livable wage to feed our families. To earn equal pay for equal work. To belong as valued citizens. To vote. To have a voice. To be able to walk or jog or shop or play or bird watch while Black. To be heard. To be seen. To be able to breathe freely.

The good news is we have a birthright to name our future. It's why we vote and help people vote, and help people understanding who and what they are voting for. Having the right to shape the policies of our collective future is at the heart of every moral revolution on our soil: the abolitionist movement, the suffrage movement, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the American Indian movement, the women's movement, the environmental justice movement, the LGBTQ+ movement, the Immigration reform movement, the re-imagining public safety movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Poor People's Campaign movement. Every movement is about fighting for policies which honor the birthright of all people.

It's been God's vision since the beginning. It is why God keeps choosing the second born. It's what Jesus means when he says that in God's kingdom the last will be first and the first will be last. It's not an arbitrary statement, it's a disruption of the social arrangement, as well as a profound truth: when we lift up those who are stuck on the bottom, everybody rises.

So keep going, Trinity. Keep doing this hard work every day in small ways. Keep writing letters to the editor calling out privilege like Catherine Morrisette did this week. Keep sending letters to local leaders on the school board like Donna did this week. Because holding ourselves

accountable means holding our leaders accountable as well. Keep wrestling with how we have personally received the privilege others haven't and how we can dismantle it brick by brick by brick.

With God's help, we keep wrestling until a common birthright for every person is finally realized. And for this promise of which we cling to its heels, may the church say, "Amen."