

**For a Pot of Stew**  
**Exodus 25:21-34**

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You can conjure a multitude of images from your memory bank to help you into this archetypal story. Pick and choose the images of the contrasting pairs:

From the *Iliad*, the Spartan warrior prince Hector and his younger brother make-love-not-war Paris

Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in the 1968 film *The Odd Couple*

Or Robin Williams and Nathan Lane as contrasting lovers in the 1996 film *The Birdcage*

Or you can simply read the story of Esau and Jacob from Genesis. The twins were just fraternal, not identical in the least bit. Esau came out first with Jacob holding onto his heel. So the birthright of the first-born technically belonged to Esau. But that is only the beginning of the intrigue.

Esau was a red hairy mess right from the moment he exited the womb while Jacob entered the world wondering about hair products.

Esau grew up Daddy's boy and he was an outdoorsman who liked to dress in camo. He would hunt and fish and stay the night in the deer stand just to get the right kill. Esau was a card-carrying member of the NRA and dreamed of hunting in African Safaris. To everyone's knowledge, he had never read one book, except for comics, that is.

While Esau was over browsing through Bass Pro Jacob was attending wine tastings, taking in opera and entertaining guests in his uber-cool downtown loft. He was the sponsor of the poetry slam in the multi-cultural center and liked international travel. He got into debates with friends about Kafka and Joyce and Dostoyevsky. Jacob often hung out with his mom in the kitchen which may be why he became such a foodie.

One day Jacob was in the kitchen stirring up his latest gastronomical wonder when smelly big

brother came crawling from one of his overnight hunts. This man never used deodorant. He never shaved. And he didn't care much about who he impressed. But he could smell the dinner cooking and he was famished.

When Esau came up to the house and started to enter Jacob said "You are not dragging your muddy boots across this carpet." Esau knew that when it came to keeping house Jacob has standards, so he slipped off his boots. Then he begged for whatever it was that smelled so good. Jacob knew his brother better than anyone, what motivated him, made him tick. And in one way or another he had been waiting for this moment all his life, the moment when the strongest brother was the hungriest, therefore at his weakest.

You see, in their culture the eldest son received the birthright, the lion's share of not only prestige but inheritance. As a twin Jacob had always felt this to be a highly unjust state of affairs. As the smartest one, he bided his time to correct it.

As his mother's favorite Jacob had an ally. And later in the story he would find a way to not only snatch the birthright but by trickery secure the blessing of his father that belonged to the eldest son for himself.

Jacob knew that Esau was motivated by the lowest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs; if he had a full belly, plenty of ammo and shelter he was a happy camper. He would do almost anything to take care of his creaturely needs first and his short-term needs always trumped any long-term goals. And so, with the perfect situation presented to him, Jacob took off his apron and sat down beside his famished brother.

"You must be starving," he began, communicating some empathy. "That's good because I've been in here laboring over a hot stove all day and I have created a masterpiece." Esau's mouth is watering and stomach growling. "But we need to have a little chat first," said Jacob.

“About what?” Esau blatted out impatiently. “About the whole birthright thing,” Jacob answered. “I am willing to make a certain deal with you this afternoon.” Esau eyes his brother warily and then says, “What kind of deal?”

Jacob stood, walked over to the stove and stirred the pot of steaming food. “I would like to propose a trade, the birthright for this delicious pot of lamb stew.” And Esau fell silent, just staring with longing eyes toward the stove.

In a minute Esau wiped his mouth and then said, “Well a birthright won’t help me in the future if I die of hunger today. Sure, deal.” At that Esau stood and started moving toward the kitchen.

“Not so fast,” Jacob said as he held up the palm of his hand as a stop sign. “Promise me.” Without a thought more Esau said “I promise,” moved into the kitchen, found the biggest spoon and took the whole pot out onto the porch where he proceeded to devour the whole thing.

Jacob sat watched his brother, grinning as he sipped on his Gin and Tonic. He has succeeded in manipulating his gullible brother all for a pot of soup. Jacob has tricked Esau into giving up his birthright - security and wealth in the future – in exchange for a stew of temporary promises, a full belly, security and prosperity that will not and cannot last for him.

You would think that Jacob would care for and about his brother more than that, but no. His greed and selfishness are willing to violate brother, to do whatever is needed to prevail. It is the opposite of love.

Devious Jacob manipulates gullible Esau to actually act against his own interests. He does this by appealing to his own most vulnerable places: His need for survival, his fears, and his security. He will protect him with a pot of soup. But the price of that soup is steep indeed, the price of which Esau is unaware or doesn’t want to think about as he smells the food on the stove top.

And the cautionary tale is this: People will do almost anything for safety and security. People will compromise almost every cherished value and principle to obtain it.

Esau is easily exploited at the point of his weakness. In the end his stomach will be empty again and Jacob will hold all the wealth and power. Esau is persuaded to compromise because he appears to benefit in the present. But in the long run it will be disastrous for him. That's what power always attempts to do, to persuade people that it is in their own best interest to give up their birthright to those who have the smarts and power to take it.

In this repeating Darwinian tale, the Jacobs of the world coerce the Esaus of the world to willingly or unwillingly forfeit what really matters for the sake of expediency, out of desperation mortgaging the future to satisfy urgent needs.

Jacob is the Caesar of Rome, throwing bread to the Esau of the crowds to placate them, while the wealth is systematically transferred from the people

who actually create the wealth to the ruling oligarchy at the top.

Jacob is the predatory payday lender that forks over cash for the emergency and Esau the one who in desperation takes the money but pays for it at 300% interest forever.

Jacob is the company that systematically spoils the environment to make profit in the short term while Esau loses the future birthright of the planet forever.

This is, of course, the world story acted out on the world stage. But we would miss the underlying truth of this Biblical story if we were to leave it only there.

I know what you may be thinking because the thought crossed my mind: Surely I would never be so devious as to pursue the path of Jacob! Surely I would never be so gullible and desperate as to be controlled and motivated as Esau was! Let me suggest that there is an important reason that this story has continued to speak to every generation.

Imagine for a moment that we are not one or the other, either Jacob or Esau, but that we are both. Imagine that we have returned to that watery world of the womb, that ocean of consciousness, and that all of those characteristics are swimming together.

We are Esau, our primitive survival instinct in play, needing security, safety, satisfaction, connection to land and instinct, beast and animal drive, tribe and boundary.

We are at the same time Jacob, achiever and creator of worlds, ingenious innovator, broker of power and taker of what is wanted, master of mind and chessboard and all things beautiful.

And we are more than these, and combinations of these and none of these. We are joined together, hand on heel, swimming together, twins and triplets and quadruplets and every character that inhabits our conscious and unconscious minds.

Imagine how, before birth into the world, we inhabit this container of transformation, this forge of the spirit, and this well of enchantment.

And then remember that the creator knows us where we are and even before we were.

How and by what will we be transformed? How and by what will we transcend the Jacob and Esau of our human nature? How and by what will this raw material be transformed into a reflection of the image of God, an echo of God's voice? Because there are some aspects swimming in this primordial sea that must change, some that must go silent and others that must rise up and be made holy.

During Dietrich Bonhoeffer's confinement in his prison cell during the Nazi regime during World War II, he was a prolific writer, many of his essays and poems smuggled out to friends. I think of that cell as his container, his womb of transformation. Listen to this poem in which he asks who he really is and how and by what he will be transformed:

## ***Who Am I?***

by Deitrich Bonhoeffer

Who am I? They often tell me  
I stepped from my cell's confinement  
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me  
I used to speak to my warders  
Freely and friendly and clearly,  
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I bore the days of misfortune  
Equably, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing  
my throat,  
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,

Tossing in expectations of great events,  
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?  
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army  
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!