

***Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels - Sermon Based on Genesis 25:19-34***  
by David Hindman on Sunday, July 10, 2011

My Great Aunt Maude and Great Uncle Rob were married for more than 50 years. Early in their marriage, Uncle Rob was in the yard chopping wood when my aunt walked up, put her finger on the chopping block and dared him to cut it off. So he did. Somehow they managed to stay married. Apparently they were made for each other.

My granddad Hindman was a general contractor and one summer he accidentally cut his finger almost entirely off so it was simply dangling by a thread. My dad was a teenager at the time and nearby when it happened. My granddad looked at what he'd done to himself and said to my dad, "Reach into my pocket, Boy, and get my pocket knife." Without batting an eye my grandfather finished removing his finger, and my dad went home sick for the rest of the day.

Needless to say, my great aunt and my grandfather didn't play the piano very well. Aren't you glad your preacher's been swimming in that gene pool?

Truth be told, many of us have some nuts on our family tree. One reason some are interested in genealogy is because we want to see how many unusual people we can find in our family. We wouldn't necessarily

want to live with them, but we're intrigued to know about the characters who somehow still live within us, even if some are dirty, rotten scoundrels.

There are oddball scoundrels in our faith family tree, too. Meet the twin boys Esau and Jacob in today's story from Genesis. Esau's not the sharpest blade in the drawer; he's presented here as a doofus or backwoods hick. Because he's so hairy I imagine him trying out for a caveman role in a Geico commercial and getting the job because he won't need make-up; or I see him as the big kid on the playground with the nickname "Red" – after all, who'd name their child Esau, which rhymes with seesaw or "Hee Haw!" Jacob's no model citizen, either. His name may mean "God protects." But the story suggests his name's a play on words for heel. And he is a heel of a guy. These two struggle and scrap with each other even before they're born. Jacob tries to wrestle his way into the world first instead of Esau, and already in this story he's a schemer grasping to get ahead. Neither have great character references; they're not the kind of guy you want your daughter to bring home to meet the parents.

And yet these two apparently have roles to play in God's plan to bring healing and hope to a broken world. How odd of God to use people like these two, to bring blessing. But if God can use them for good, God can use us, too. Amazing.

When I was growing up, two of the saints in my life were Mr. Lemon and Mr. Lyon. They stood outside the Sunday school building each week to greet everyone who entered. To me they were God's doormen; they made me feel special by calling me by name and knowing who I was.

Unbeknownst to them they taught me that God cared for me and knew my name, and I was special in God's eyes, too. Years later I told a friend about these two guys and the role they played in my faith journey. My friend was stunned with surprise. My friend went here to Macon with Mr. Lyon's son, and only knew Mr. Lyon as an irascible, unrepentant racist. To my friend Mr. Lyon was a scoundrel, but God used him for good in my life. Amazing. Down through the ages, God has used lots of scoundrels to bring blessing in spite of ourselves: Jesus' disciples come to mind. Or a slave ship captain made rich by transporting human cargo who also wrote "Amazing Grace" and changed a million lives. Or a Crips gang member Dwight Zavitz baptized when he pastored a church in Richmond. If God does good and brings blessing through folks like that, surely God can use us, don't you think?

But be careful. Be very careful. God has this unexpected irritating habit of turning things upside down contrary to the way we think things should be. Esau and Jacob live in a culture that gives preference to the

eldest, the first born. Special rights and privileges go to the oldest son automatically. But in this story God prefers the younger. When Rebekah is pregnant she learns that God has other plans for these two: the older will serve the younger; the weaker will be the master of the stronger. And sure enough, Jacob weasels Esau out of his birthright; later Jacob will get the blessing Isaac really intends for Esau. We say that's not fair. But in this story God is in charge and working for good in these unexpected ways. Apparently God is free to do as God chooses without our permission or approval. And that's true throughout scripture, like it or not. Elsewhere God says, "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." After their big escape from slavery in Egypt God says to the wandering people of Israel, "I didn't choose you because you're more numerous or righteous or powerful. I chose you because I love you." In the New Testament, a pregnant teenaged girl named Mary sings "God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty; God has thrown down the mighty from their throne and lifted up the no-count person." And Jesus himself tells a story about a landowner who at day's end pays everyone the same, whether they've worked all day or just an hour. When the worn out sweaty ones grumble the owner says "I paid you what we agreed. It's my money so if I choose to be generous, what's it to you? Or are you jealous because I'm

generous?” Jacob, Israel, Mary, the workers in Jesus’ story all receive grace. Amazing grace. Undeserved and unearned and unexpected blessing from a generous and free God. And it ticks us off - until we receive it. Live long enough and be honest and you know what an irreplaceable and precious gift it is to know that much of what happens in your life is beyond your deserving. Then we know how blessed we are to have such a God in charge, and not us, thanks be to God.

We might think Esau is such an idiot. Why on earth would he sell his birthright and privileged status for a bowl of stew? Perhaps because it was right in front of him. He chose what he could have now instead of a richer blessing not yet seen. And maybe he thought he was getting a deal. The stew’s red; he may think he’s getting blood soup, a potent potion providing exceptional powers and life. But looks deceive. All he got was lentil stew. He didn’t know beans about what really matters and he became the poorer for it. Before we mock or put him down, think about this. In Christ we have been given an incredible treasure and inheritance. We can live as God’s sons and daughters and experience the rich and abundant life we see in Christ. And yet for the sake of immediate gratification or because it’s easy, we can forsake those blessings for food that will not satisfy. We can sell our souls for more and more stuff or security or a nice portfolio or popularity or

the latest fashion or whatever's the latest techno-toy. In a consumer society where all that matters is what I want and comfort and ease, we can be consumed and sell our birthright for a mess of pottage. Sometimes it's easier to grab after the American dream than to join in God's long hard work of redemption and forgiveness and justice and mercy. So before we knock Esau we might pay a visit on our own lives and appetites and re-think what we're about and what truly matters to us. That's what repentance is: re-thinking our lives, going a new direction, getting a new mind and heart and life and making the ways of God our ways. It's receiving this priceless inheritance: Christ living in us and daily being transformed by his Spirit to be more like him in every way. Here's the good news: God wants us to want that new life, and to give it to us as the wonderful gift it is, not because we deserve it or have noble family lines, but because that's how God is - choosing mercy and turning things upside down right-side up, thanks be to God.