

Year A, July 16, 2017
6 Pentecost (Proper 10)
Christ Church, Mexia

This morning, we heard the familiar story of Esau and Jacob, Isaac's sons. And as usual there are many things this scripture may speak to us about. When I read it this time, birthright caught my attention.

We don't think much about birthright today, but it was a very important part of the lives of our forefathers in the Bible. The word birthright referred to the very special privileges and advantages of the firstborn son of a father. And in those times when a man could have many wives, it was the firstborn son, not the mother to whom he was born, that was important.

That is why Sarah had to persuade Abraham to send Hagar away. Otherwise, the birthright rested on Ishmael, not Isaac. Now God approved of this action because Isaac was meant to continue the covenant God had made with Abraham, but to be fair God assured Abraham that a great people, a nation, would also come from Ishmael because he too was Abraham's son. There are also some other examples in the Bible where the birthright was changed to someone other than the firstborn, usually with justification.

But the main point is that a birthright was an extremely important right. After the father died, or if he was absent, the first-born assumed all of the authority of the father, and in most cases assumed the role of priest in the family. Upon the death of the father, the first born received two thirds of the estate, twice as much as all of the other sons combined. And, of course, for kings, the successor was to be the firstborn male. We see that in monarchy's today and the general rules I have outlined are still important in the Middle East today as well.

Though we may not pay much attention to birthright here where a person is free to make a will, dividing what they have to anyone, or no one, as they choose, we do have rights according to our births. For example, we are reminded so eloquently in the Declaration of Independence, that we have certain unalienable rights, such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These are the principles upon which our nation was formed, and under our Constitution, anyone born in this country have the rights specifically guaranteed by that document, or more specifically the Bill of Rights.

As we are created in the image of God, we have become the sons and daughters of God, especially through our baptism and participation in the Eucharist, as these sacraments demonstrate our intention to claim this birthright. These birthrights of citizenship and of God are not restricted to the first-born son, but rather are available to every one of us.

I have never experienced hunger, as possibly Esau did; I was hungry during survival training in the Army and sometimes in combat, but not enough to want to sell my birthright for a meal. You would have to be extremely hungry, addicted, or whatever, to do that, I think. Maybe you have experience times like that. If you have, I'm sorry.

The thing we have to avoid is losing our citizenship, which under some conditions could happen in this country. But the good news is that God loves us regardless of what we have done or failed to do. The only way we can lose our birthright with God, is to refuse to accept it.

In the name of the one God the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.