

“Cheap Imitations”  
Genesis 25:19-34  
First Presbyterian Church  
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What we become in life is measured largely by whom we understand ourselves to be. The goals we set for ourselves determine the direction we travel and are a product of the identity we give ourselves. I know from personal experience that a direction in life can change over time as our identities grow and mature. Having been a university professor, I can assure you that most freshmen have absolutely no idea where they are going when they enter the ivy-covered towers of academia. Most have no idea of what their major is going to be. It usually is listed as “undefined,” and it may stay that way well into their junior year. I had five majors in five semesters, all of them in the sciences, and then finally decided I didn’t know what I was doing in school and joined the army. I wouldn’t normally suggest that as an antidote for “Junior Blues,” but it was what I needed.

After three years in the service, I was pretty sure I didn’t want to be a sergeant the rest of my life, so I returned to the university in music with the hope that I could return to Europe and make it on the opera stage. However, as I got back into the academic swing of things, the same old nagging feeling that this was not what I was supposed to be doing came back. I finally went to my pastor and told him that I felt like God might be calling me to the ministry. His response was “when do you want to go before the Session?” It was “put up or shut up” time. I walked through that door, because I knew that was what God was calling me to do. I have tried to follow that initial call all my life, and it has led me in many and varied directions, but I know that every twist and turn has been a product of God’s leading. There is no question in my mind that that call was and still is from God. It is out of that, that my identity as a person has grown.

Esau had his own identity as a hunter and outdoorsman. He must have enjoyed the beauty of the natural world. He must have liked the thrill of the chase. His was a world of immediacy, the world of the tangible. Farsightedness does not seem to have been a prominent quality in his makeup. Thus, when he comes in from a hunt and is famished and finds Jacob cooking a meal, he gives away what could have been the most elevating element in his life for a quick meal. He gives away his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew, but it wasn’t just any old birthright. It wasn’t the right of the eldest to the lands and property and titles, like we find in Downton Abbey. It wasn’t just the birthright to the family business. Nor was it the birthright to the family fortune. No, it was the right to the promises God had given to Abraham and his descendants.

God had promised Abraham that a great nation would arise from him, that he would be protected, and that through him and his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. What an incredible promise. That could have been Esau’s promise, but he chose to

give it away for a cheap imitation in a shortsighted moment of desire for the immediate reward of a bowl of stew. His possibilities had no meaning to him. It was the here and now that mattered to him. I want this now. Patience for the future was not in him. I remember reading about a study one psychologist carried out with children of about five years of age. As I remember, he gave each of the children a marshmallow and told them that they were welcome to eat it right then, but if they would wait ten minutes, he would give them another, and then they could eat them both. As you can imagine, some couldn't wait and ate the marshmallow immediately. Others did wait and were rewarded with a second marshmallow. But that isn't the end of the story.

The researcher followed these children as they grew into adulthood and found that those who had waited for the second treat were uniformly more successful in life than those who sought immediate gratification. That should raise the question for all of us whether we settle for cheap imitations in our lives, because we want immediate satisfaction, or whether we have a guiding goal that gives us identity and purpose for which we are willing to wait, if need be. Sadly, Esau settled for the first.

As Christians, we are recipients of the Abrahamic promise. We have the promise of divine direction and the ability to bless the lives of the people with whom we come into contact. The real question is, "what are we doing with it?" How many barriers are we erecting between ourselves and God, because we are pursuing things that may be pleasant, but which in the long run, don't really matter either to us or to those people around us? Have we found the identity to which God has been calling us, but which is being sidetracked by the cheap imitations with which we have surrounded ourselves? If we are to move forward with our lives, we need a clear sense of what we want to be able to contribute to this world, given our unique identities and talents.

Two men who had a vision that led them throughout their lives were Wilbur and Orville Wright. Flo Beth and I have found that there is a lot of "sameness" along I-80 through Nebraska and Wyoming, especially when doing it for the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> time. Since we have grandkids in Utah, we can't totally ignore the trip. But we have discovered recorded books, and the book by David McCullough entitled *The Wright Brothers* made the miles fly by on one of our trips. These were two incredible men. They had absolute clarity about their goals and about how their different personalities and skills complemented one another. If they are an example, our birthrights are born with us, but we have to be willing to find them within ourselves. From Wilbur's and Orville's earliest days as children, they were fascinated by flight. They watched the birds and decided that if they could fly, it just might be possible that human beings could one day fly.

As I suspect all of you know, the Wrights made their living building bicycles. But their passion was flying. They studied birds to determine what gave them the lift to fly. They studied their feathers, their wings, the way they turned, and the way they used their tails. They studied what other inventors had already tried, getting whatever information the Smithsonian Institute had on previous attempts at flight. Others had built gliders, but that was not what the Wrights

were after, although they could learn from attempts at wing design from these trials. Like the others, their first flights were with gliders, which gave them insight into what was needed to steer an aircraft. They built the first wind tunnel in which they could try various wing configurations, and by doing so they discovered that all the ratios previously believed to be optimum for lift were just guesses.

They wanted to be away from probing eyes, so they went to Kitty Hawk off the North Carolina coast where they began experimenting with various designs. Their first attempts to get airborne with powered flight were failures, and they went back to Kitty Hawk for several seasons. Finally, on December 17, 1903, they made the first successful controlled powered flight. From there they went on to ever longer flights, building test facilities outside their hometown of Dayton, Ohio, and far outstripping their competition both in the United States and in Europe. It was their singularity of purpose that made them successful. They refused to be sidetracked from their goal of powered flight.

Each human being can be sidetracked from his or her inherent identity. It is so easy to trade what is really valuable in us for something that is counterfeit and cheap. The sad side of life is that we spend an inordinate amount of our time pursuing those things that have no eternal value. Yes, the world or society thinks that so many things are of enormous value, but on the Lord's scale of values where do they fall? Not very high.

What are some of the counterfeit things that human beings pursue that pull them away from their divine birthrights? Power is probably a large one. Few of us like merely to be a cog in the wheel of progress. Most of us want some say in what happens in our jobs, in school, at church, or at home. The danger of any kind of power is that it begins to lead to the sense that we are right and other's ideas are inferior. We begin to push our goals. In doing so we forget that we are dealing with human beings, and that they have as much value as do we. It is easy to point to the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Saddam Husseins, and the Castros of the world as examples of power gone astray. However, we see many of the same characteristics in our businesses, in our local governments, and perhaps even in our homes. Sadly, domestic abuse is on the rise. It is because people have forgotten that the real birthright of all of us is to be a blessing to those around us.

Other things of the world continue to distract us from the what really matters. Larger homes draw us. The new car is alluring. The next sporting event of the season calls to us. The more I read the scriptures, the less I understand how people cannot see that Judaism and Christianity have at root a social message for this world. It is a social message of justice and equality. There is no question about the objects of God's concern. He is always on the side of the widow, the orphan, the poor, the downtrodden, the starving, the helpless, the homeless, the refugee, the alien, and the racially despised. The calling of each of us is to use our skills and talents to do God's work expressed in the Abrahamic covenant by being a blessing to the nations.

Human beings are tremendously inventive. The Wrights invented the airplane, which has now been used for both great good by binding the human family together, but it has also brought great evil as the deliverer of death to so many as it has dropped bombs. The same holds true of atomic energy, the rocket, the internet, TV, and every other human invention. I have the privilege of being able to preach the gospel as one of my contributions to blessing the nations, but think how you might use the vocation to which God has called you to bless your neighbors. Martin Luther's image of the Christian is of one who comes before God with an empty sack, holds it open while God fills it up, and then swings around and empties its contents out to his or her neighbors. He or she then returns, holding the bag open, so that God can refill it, and the process is repeated.

Vocations are not merely for making money to support a family or to raise a family. They are given to us so that we may bless other people. Is there Pro Bono work that you can do for a poor person—fix the car for free, being of help to our children with their children, help with creating a will, a free medical exam, meals for a family where someone is ill, groceries for the neighbor who has just lost a job, cleaning someone's house, mowing an elderly person's lawn for free, or giving music lessons to a child whose parents can't afford them. All of these are ways, we, each in our own unique ways, can fulfill the Abrahamic covenant of which we are all heirs. These are not the avenues the secular world values. Their values are money, power, and prestige, instead of compassion, help, and love which Jesus has shown us are his values. May we ever be more like him.

Amen