

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11

July 12, 2026





In professional wrestling, matches are typically fought between a “heel” and a “face.” A “heel” is the bad guy, the villain of the match, who may or may not be defeated by the good guy, the innocent “babyface” (or “face,” for short). The black-and-white morality play is an essential part of this sport/performance; yet there is also significant fluidity to the roles for specific wrestlers. For instance, Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson, arguably the most famous professional wrestler alive, has been both a face and a heel at various times over his nearly three-decade wrestling career. “Do you smell what the Rock is cooking” – his famous catchphrase – was debuted during his first heel phrase in 1998. He continued to use it when he turned face in 1999 — and when he turned heel again in 2004.

The story of God’s chosen family is a lot like the world of professional wrestling: there are a lot of characters who seem constantly to turn face to

heel or heel to face. Abraham, the “father of the faith,” repeatedly cuts shady deals to pimp out his beautiful wife Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah pray together for her barrenness to be overcome – and it is! – only to have Rebekah cry out in complaint that God has “blessed her” with a painful pregnancy.

Then there are the two main characters of this Sunday’s text: Esau and Jacob. Esau is born feral and strong, and Jacob is, well, a heel-grabber. It seems pretty clear who ought to be the face and the heel; yet the prophetic word of God calls for a role reversal! It is Jacob who comes out on top in the end, according to God’s promised plan (turns out the fight was fixed all along). Yet it seems to me that Jacob, though the victor, remains the heel in this story.

What are we to make of the fact that God chooses the heel to win?

In his fantastic commentary on the book of Genesis, the late theologian Walter Brueggemann emphasized that it tells the story of how God calls creation into being and calls out of that creation a chosen community to witness and testify to God’s personality. While the call of creation is wondrous to behold, the call of God’s election (choosing) is scandalous: “God’s grace is free and scandalous. The unlegitimated one may be the bearer of God’s purpose.”

The story of Jacob’s scandalous subversion of Esau’s birthright is told in a way only a crossword puzzler could love. There is wordplay in nearly every verse. For example, Rebekah’s exasperated comment about her difficult pregnancy in verse 22 ends with the word “live,” which is the same Hebrew root as the word for “the Lord.” That God is the way and the life is a familiar sentiment (see John 14:6), but who knew that it is also a clever use of homophones?

Much is made of Esau’s appearance, and his apparent love of all things reddish (see verses 25, 30), and of Jacob’s giving and “grasping” (see verses 34 and 26). The succinct yet vivid choice of words is a reminder of the care taken in the writing of this narrative. It also reminds us that the

written word is meant to be opened and explored further, if we are to meet the God who is in the background of the struggle between the brothers.

This story plays out a longstanding debate among social scientists and armchair psychologists about the importance of nature vs nurture. Both Jacob and Esau are described as born with certain tendencies, yet it is clear that one of them is getting more guidance and care by hanging around at home with his mother (Jacob), and the other is out “in the field” on his own, relying on his wits and instincts.

It is Esau’s immediacy, his rootedness in “the flesh” (to use the Pauline term from Romans 8) that ultimately is his downfall. Jacob, meanwhile, is calm, cool, and collected, keeping his mind and his courage on the prize (his brother’s birthright). In Romans 8:5-6, Paul concludes that those whose thoughts are bound up in their fleshly self will miss out: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Yet there is a hubris, also, in believing that one side of this dualism holds up. Nature/culture, flesh/Spirit: the answer, disclosed in Christ, is the great “both-and” — or, perhaps, following the thinker behind the 20th century’s most famous commentary on Romans, Karl Barth, “neither-nor.” Such is the Word of God, Barth argues, that it creates a crisis: “the transformation of everything that we know as Humanity, Nature, and History, and must therefore be apprehended as the negation of the starting-point of every system which we are capable of conceiving.”

Anyone living knows that it is a struggle — not quite like being thrown into a wrestling ring, but ... there are days. Yet, in this struggle, Barth asserts, we are often offered either pure escape (“to formulate no question, and therefore to hear no answer”) or the pure, pious certainty of religion, which is still a merely human creation: “Woe be to us, if from the summits of religion there pours forth nothing but — religion!”

Our singular hope comes in the unbeckoned, unexpected and undeniable call of a God who is God, who can work through faces or heels, because in Christ Jesus, God has known all that humanity is and knows all that humanity can and will be into eternity.

The struggle is not to overcome the world, but to discipline it according to our black-and-white sense of righteousness. The world has already been overcome. The promise has already been made. And God keeps God's promises, come what may.

Questions for reflection on Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11

1. When has the Word of God been scandalous for you? When was the last time the Word of God caused a "scandal" in your church? Was the scandal about God's work, or about people? What would it look like for God's Word to cause a scandal in your church?
2. Esau and Jacob seem to be fated to struggle against each other. What struggle do you sense God is calling you to engage in?
3. What images or ideas of God does this text invite us to think about? What would it be like to look beyond those religious or human intuitions, and consider the "God who is God" standing behind and above them?