

First Presbyterian Church-Birmingham
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No Bargain

There is nothing more aggravating for a pediatrician than to have a family refuse immunizations for their child. I won't ask if any of you fall into that category--I don't want to know! We know that immunizations protect children from a host of deadly or neurologically impairing conditions. During my time in practice I saw the occurrence of pneumococcal meningitis, H. Flu meningitis, and H. Flu epiglottitis, to name just three potentially devastating diseases, almost completely disappear. So why do some parents chose not to immunize their children? Some feel that the very small risk of an adverse effect from the vaccine should be avoided, even if it exposes their child to the greater risk of death or disability from the diseases from which the child would be protected. There is also the argument that enough children are being immunized that their child will be protected by "herd immunity." In other words, the diseases won't occur because they are warded off by the "herd" of vaccinated persons. That doesn't work, of course, if an unimmunized foreign traveler brings the illness into the environment. And it leaves children who have not been able to receive live vaccines because of immunosuppression from cancer treatment or other circumstances at greater risk. How should we think about our responsibility to a community threatened by disease?

Last Sunday John described sin as a spiritual disease, and St. Paul laments in Romans 7 how this condition of sin keeps us from doing what we know we should do as children of the living God. In Romans 8, from which we just heard the first eleven verses, Paul now rejoices in our freedom “from the law of sin and death.” He goes on to say, “...the Spirit of God dwells in you.” How can Paul shift so quickly from his negative commentary on the human condition in Romans 7 to his optimistic view about the power of God’s Spirit at work in us? One way to think about this is to consider our baptism into Christ as a spiritual immunization that protects us from the ravages of sin and death. It does not change our human condition. Moreover, it does not protect us from challenges, hardships, or suffering in this life. It does enable a new way of being in the world. In fact, once we are baptized we are called by God to live into our baptism by being agents of Jesus Christ for the renewal and reconciliation of this world. Christ becomes the center as we seek to live as persons whose minds are set on “the things of the spirit.”

Baptism is therefore a very serious business. When parents choose this for their children, they also agree to model this living into one’s baptism so that their child grows to understand how the Christian life is a different way of being, not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds [Romans 12:2]. Now I admit that we and our children often don’t live this out. But we can look to God’s grace to help us live into our baptism if we pay attention to opportunities God gives us to do so, and take seriously our birthright as children of God. Now I don’t need to remind you

that the history of God's people contains many instances of rebellion against God, an example being multiple outbreaks of rebellion following the exodus from Egypt. The people of God were not taking the birthright of their covenant with God seriously enough and in sufficient numbers to prevent the ravages of spiritual disease. Yet God continues to claim them and lead them.

Esau did not take his birthright seriously. He and his twin brother, Jacob, were not bad people, although we would not see either one as a role model for godly behavior. They started fighting in the womb, and their mother, Rebekah, figured she was in for a rough delivery. You'll recall from the Genesis passage we heard that she even wondered if she could survive the pregnancy. Jacob is described as grasping Esau's heel at delivery, presumably to try to get delivered first. As young adults, one is willing to sell his birthright for food; the other is conniving and willing to take advantage of a brother in need. Recently, at our Rejoicing Spirits' service in June, John and I acted out the roles of the brothers in a skit prepared by Terry Chaney. I found myself definitely in sympathy with Esau, and took that role. Esau is strong, athletic, and confident; Jacob hangs around the home and thinks up a way to cheat his brother. But be clear about one thing: Esau does not take his birthright seriously.

Esau knew that he was his father's favorite. He also knew, birthright or no birthright, that he would receive his father's blessing when the old man died. The culture was totally on Esau's side. The first born received all the

father's property and other assets period! So what does it matter if a person takes his birthright for granted or gives it away? This is the heart of the matter. God chooses Jacob to be the father of the chosen people of Israel--in spite of the fact that Jacob is a clever scoundrel--because God recognizes in Jacob the qualities he needs. And the most important quality is that Jacob takes God seriously. Recall that Jacob has a dream at Bethel in which a ladder extends from earth to heaven. He has a vision of God standing next to him and blessing him, promising to be with him forever. The relationship is not perfect, however. Jacob does experience conflict with God. Remember when Jacob wrestles with God at Peniel [Genesis 32: 22-31]. He asks God for a blessing, which God gives along with a permanent disability.

In spite of ups and downs and questionable character, what distinguishes Jacob and Esau is the fact that Jacob has a real relationship with God. He seeks God. He cares about and wants God's blessing. Normal power relationships in this ancient world are turned upside down. This is not to say that being a clever scoundrel is a good thing! It is to say that God's grace does not discriminate against those WE would consider unworthy. It looks into the heart and finds those who care about their relationship with God. Unlike his brother Esau, Jacob looks into a future controlled by God and trusts God with his life. Esau has a shorter perspective. He relies on the conventions of the day and grasps a prize he can see because he believes he needs it to secure his own future--yes, a pot of stew for a starving brother. As Walter Brueggemann points out, we

are taught in this story that the future is not secured by rights or claims of family, but by the grace of God securing God's future--even when we humans make bad choices. Jacob and Esau make a bargain involving birthright because Esau believes he controls his own future. We know, of course, that it is God's purposes that are secured.

So how do we fall into the same trap that ensnared Esau? What are ways that we sell our birthright of baptism into Christ's death and resurrection? When do we choose to satisfy our strong hungers with those material things the world provides with promises of a better life--things present here and now--no waiting, no trusting in God's promises required? There are plenty of bargains out there for an immediate reward, but they are truly no bargain. When we trust God's promise to restore, renew, and reconcile the world, and accept our birthright to be part of that work, we live our lives with a different perspective. It is a perspective that seeks to be in relationship with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ. We strive to make good decisions regarding our life choices, not decisions that grasp at spurious opportunities to control our own future.

The Romans' passage and the Genesis' passage are both about conflict and promise. Conflict is inevitable in life, but our response to it can seek to discover God's intention for humankind or ignore God's intention. God is at work creating a future where our fellow travelers in this life are free to love God and each other. When we try to control the future to our own advantage, when we try to create a future out of material benefit we can

see, we can miss out on the material benefits God is establishing for the people of God. Even worse, we may ignore and despise the power of God to create transforming life out of nothing we can see or perceive.

Remember that Paul uses 'flesh' in his letter to the Romans to describes not our bodies but rather whom we serve. We do not have a 'higher' or 'lower' nature. We have our being, which is either in Christ or focused on gratifying the self. The transforming Spirit of God is a gift from God--unbidden and undeserved--not a part of our nature. It requires our attention to perceive God's intention and to trust the Spirit of God at work among us. Conflict is inevitable because there are two ways of understanding reality--one defined by God's purposes and one defined by immediate, perceptible rewards. The promise that defines God's reality is the reconciliation of the world to God and eternal life for all who live into God's claim upon his people.

Our baptism immunizes us, if you will, to live in freedom as children of God. Our challenge as disciples of Jesus Christ is to live into the freedom we have in Christ to choose reconciliation where there is conflict; to choose love and inclusion where there is hatred, apathy, or exclusion; to choose a future shaped by the life-giving power of God rather than one dictated by narrow self-interest. We are called to live into our baptism as free agents of Jesus Christ bringing love and life wherever we see conflict and death. We have been immunized by the power of Christ against the life-constricting effects of sin. We cannot defer to the community of other Christians to live into this new life. We cannot depend on a "spiritual herd

immunity.” We have been immunized against sin to live into our own calling because the decisions we make matter to God, and God works through each one of us. The alternative is to choose a path dictated by our own limited vision, but that is no bargain. Esau discovered this the hard way, and we should be careful not to despise our own birthright. Work hard to live into your baptism, so that you may daily increase in God’s Holy Spirit more and more until you pass into that relationship with God that has no end.

Thanks be to God for the spirit which brings life and peace through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.