

Susan Gascho-Cooke
July 23, 2017 at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
"Dreams of Discomfort"
Genesis 28:10-19

I recently listened to a recording of a guided meditation. I clicked the play button, and a silky voice began to speak: "Put your body in a comfortable position. Lie down or sit back in a comfy chair. As you're moving your body, make it as comfortable as you can ..."

Some variation of this introduction is what I have heard almost every time I've been led in a guided meditation. "Search your body for any places of discomfort and relax any places of tension. Now imagine a place of safety and beauty ..."

Current conventional wisdom seems to be, that the best posture and position to prepare one's self to receive insight or vision is to get comfy.

Which brings us to our story from Genesis today. Here we have Jacob, demonstrating how *not* to properly prepare for a vision. "When the sun goes down, just lay down wherever you are, even if you're in the middle of nowhere. Reach for the nearest stone, and lay your head on it," said no silky-voiced meditation leader ever.

And yet ... here is Jacob, proceeding to have a very vivid dream in which he is encountered by God, and in which God speaks powerful promises to him. How did this grandson of Abraham find himself lying alone, in the middle of nowhere, with only a stone for a pillow? As Regina Shands Stoltzfus preached in worship at Mennonite convention, "context matters." So here is a bit of Jacob's story, as context for his dream:

Jacob came from a family of promise and a family of conflict. His grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, were childless into their late years, but God told them they'd have a child of their own. They weren't able to believe that could happen, so they made Hagar, a servant in their household, sleep with Abraham in order to conceive this promised son. There are harder, more honest, terms both for Hagar's position in their household, for the nonconsensual sex she was forced to have, and for the lack of choice she had over her body and her life. But such terms are inconvenient for family and church settings. So we euphemize. But this is how Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, was born.

A little time passed and Sarah herself became pregnant, giving birth to Abraham's second-born son, Isaac. Sarah was very jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, though, and had them kicked out of the household, in order to secure Isaac's place as rightful firstborn. Because being firstborn, if you were male, mattered in that time and place. You inherited the patriarchy of your family, and double the possessions. So, here is a story of the intrigue of a mother, and of two brothers set at odds with one another over inheritance and identity.

Isaac grew up to marry Rebekah, and become Jacob's father. Jacob, like his father Isaac, was a second-born son, although he narrowly missed being firstborn – for Jacob is the younger twin brother of Esau, the true firstborn of Rebekah and Isaac. As the story goes, Jacob emerged from his mother grasping the heel of his brother, Esau, already trying to get ahead. And lo and behold, here we have another story of the intrigue of a mother, and two brothers set at odds with one another over inheritance and identity.

Jacob and Esau were very different, we are told. Isaac favored Esau, and Rebekah favored Jacob. Rebekah inquired of God during her pregnancy, and was told:

‘Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.’”

A prophecy she set her heart on helping to come true. Because pushing prophecy along went so well for her in-laws, right? Learning from history has never been the strong suit of the Judeo-Christian tradition, I'm afraid

Esau didn't seem to take the privileges of being a firstborn very seriously, though. One day when they were young men, Esau came in from the field, famished, and asked for a bowl of the stew Jacob was cooking. Jacob said, “I'll give you some, if you sell me your birthright.” Esau says, essentially, “whatever!” So, Jacob made him swear an oath, which he did. And they sealed the deal in the eating of the meal.

Years later, when their father, Isaac, was old and blind and about to die, Isaac called to Esau and said, go hunt some game and prepare a meal for me so I give you the blessing of the firstborn. But Rebekah caught wind of the plan, and managed to get Jacob to go into Isaac, disguised as Esau, and Isaac accidentally proclaimed his blessing on Jacob, instead.

Thus Esau hated Jacob, it says, and vowed to kill him after their father died. He had come to regret losing his birthright, and now he had lost the blessing, as well.

So, Jacob fled, fearing for his life. He left his father's deathbed, and in so doing was ironically also leaving behind the family he now had the blessing to lead, and the household that he now had the birthright to inherit. All that scheming, down the tube. And he ran for his life.

This is where we catch up to Jacob, dreaming on a stone. So bereft of possessions that he was left to pass the night in the middle of nowhere, with literally nothing on

which to lay his head. The guy who just got it all, went to sleep alone, hated by his brother, separated from the father whose heart he had just broken, and from the mother who had orchestrated his takeovers.

It's hard for me to muster a lot of sympathy for him. I've never much liked these stories about Jacob. The trickster is not an archetype I easily identify with. I have done pretty well by the rules in my life. Even the times that I could be considered a "rule-breaker," such as the ways I'm "at variance" with MCUSA membership guidelines for having officiated the wedding of a same-gender couple, are really much more about a very devoted obedience to a deeper set of rules I'm very much choosing to follow, because that's where I discern God's leading and Jesus' teachings pointing. So even that isn't really rule-breaking.

And even when I have broken rules, I have been able to be very transparent about the rules I choose to break. I have never had to break a rule to get something I deserved that was being denied me. I have never had to break a rule to ensure my safety or my place in my family. I have ridden the coattails of people who *have* risked much to make my rule-breaking a possibility.

Not that long ago, I would have been breaking the rules to be a woman in this pulpit – but others broke the rules, and then demanded they be changed before I had to confront them. Emma Richards was the first Mennonite woman to be ordained as a pastor, in 1973. My great-aunt Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, was the first woman ordained in Virginia Conference in 1989 at 74 years old, and my own grandfather (her brother) left Virginia conference in protest. Ten years ago, our Elizabeth Nissley and Lancaster District defied Lancaster Conference in the act of her ordination, paving the way for many Mennonite women to answer calls to ministry here in Lancaster County.

Not that long ago, I would have been breaking the rules to be a white woman married to a black man. But others not only broke the rules before us, but broke them down for us. Richard and Mildred Loving went all the way to the Supreme Court 50 years ago in *Loving vs. the State of Virginia*, to legalize and de-criminalize their interracial marriage in the state where I would be born eight years later. The presence and voice of African-American Mennonites in the 1950s, 60s and 70s: Vincent Harding, John Powell, Hubert Brown helped to make a place for my family in the Mennonite world.

There have been rules and laws restricting a woman's ability to walk freely in this world, but even coming from a tradition which not so long ago taught submission and silence for women, I grew up in a household where my parents made the hard first steps away from those teachings, though it meant leaving the graces of their own parents in some measure.

Not all the trickstering and rule-breaking in my history is noble, though. I live on the land I live on because the Native Americans of this region were tricked or killed off their land by the white Americans who came before me – a birthright and blessing very thoroughly stolen. And one that demands reparation.

I get to be a rule-breaker in relative safety and ease. I've never had to be a trickster, but I am where I am because of the risky rule-breaking of many before me. But my awareness of the ways in which the waters have been parted to make way for me in so many ways brings me to Jacob's story with a new set of eyes.

I used to feel impatient about Jacob and Rebekah's actions. Even if the rules of inheritance were unfair, why didn't Jacob just *talk* to Isaac or Esau about it – why the trickery? why the deception? Might such actions not be necessary, and justified, and just plain just, “in order to open a closed system”? (1)

As the story of slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter reminds us, in the words of MLK, Jr in his letter from a Birmingham Jail (hear the rule-breaking?): "We know through painful experience that *freedom* is *never* voluntarily given by the *oppressor*; it must be demanded by the *oppressed*."

Might there be a reading of Rebekah and Jacob's actions here? Esau and Isaac didn't have any plans to make the inheritance system fairer for non-firstborn siblings. It seems they didn't have the eyes to see the inequality, or to question the fairness or justice of it

When Esau found out that Jacob had tricked Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing intended for him, he asked his father: “Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?” Isaac responded: “I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?”

Esau wept: “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, too, my father!”

I feel for Esau. And yet what is happening here is simply a change in location or possession of an unfair blessing. The inequity of the blessing would have been the same had Esau managed to maintain the birthright and blessing that society said was right and proper for a first-born male to have. Esau wasn't weeping over the injustice of inequality. He was weeping over his loss of privilege and power – of being the one with more.

Granted, Jacob didn't attempt to make things equal. He attempted to get what was Esau's, to be in possession of the greater portion.

As one commentator said, “Acts of blessing in the Old Testament rest on accepted *conventions*. Such words produce effects because of certain social understandings re: the function of these speech-acts.” (2) Isaac had spoken the words with Jacob, and sealed the ritual with the sharing of a meal.

The power of the blessing, the birthright, and the whole system of inheritance, rested on everyone in society upholding and accepting the system. Because Isaac, Esau, Rebekah and Jacob all bought in to it, they could see no choices beyond which son would get the disproportionate blessing and inheritance. It was a radical happening that a woman and a second-born child changed their fates. But it was a swap, not a leveling.

It's a wonder that the Judeo-Christian tradition has kept to the assumptions about family inheritance ... firstborn sons don't have great track records in the biblical narratives. They are rarely moral exemplars, nor do they fare well. In fact, the words "firstborn son" in a Bible story are a bit like a red shirt in a Star Trek episode. It's often a clue that things won't go well for that person.

Cain, the Bible's first firstborn son ends up in exile for killing his little brother, Abel. You heard a recap of Ishmael and Isaac's story, which didn't even include Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac, which happened after Ishmael was cast off and Isaac could be passed off as the *real* firstborn. Things went poorly for Esau. Think of the plague of the firstborns in the exodus narrative. Saul's sons never got to be kings, and Solomon's struggled. When young Samuel is called by God and answers: "Here I am," the task he's given is to tell his mentor, Eli, that Eli's sons won't inherit his line as priests, because of their sinfulness. God's own firstborn son, Jesus, was crucified as a criminal.

Chosen-ness in the Bible always gets interpreted as hereditary, when it seems so clear that divine blessing follows faithfulness rather than bloodline. Again, the Genesis commentator says:

because of the recalcitrance and deception of the chosen themselves, blessing sometimes has the effect of dividing as often as uniting. One should reflect deeply on this story from the perspective of those who believe themselves to be chosen and how they relate to those who are the 'unchosen.' The degree to which religious convictions have provoked strife in the modern world should occasion deep shame on the part of members of the community of faith and a renewed sense of what it means to be a responsible recipient of divine blessing. (3)

True to the pattern, neither Jacob nor Esau were not responsible recipients of the blessing or birthright when they were entrusted with it.

Let us return to Jacob on the rock. There he is, trying to get a good night's sleep, fresh from his blessing heist. Asleep, perchance to dream. And dream he does. The dream he was lucky enough to have, despite not following the proper pre-dream instructions to find a happy comfy place, was of the heaven's opening up, and angels ascending and descending from heaven to earth on a huge ladder. And God came up beside him and spoke, re-affirming the same promises made to Abraham and Isaac: *Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*

When Jacob wakes up he says: "Surely God is in the place—and I didn't know it!" So he uses his stone pillow to mark the place as holy ground. And then he says to God: *If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I go, and give me bread and clothing ... then I'll make this stone into a house of God, and tithe all that I have.*

Jacob dares to speak back conditions to God – *if* God takes care of me, then I might be faithful, too. This is a whole new level of trickstery audacity It's one thing to break human rules, in order to be faithful to the deeper justice of God's laws. But what does it mean to make obedience to God provisional upon God's faithfulness? What does it mean to say to God – *I have a right to ask for food and safety and a place to be for me and my family?*

This is, after all, the guy who physically wrestles with God, so the story goes, to get a blessing, and God is said to have grudgingly respected him for it. What would it mean to be that kind of rule-breaker?

Maybe that kind of audacity only comes from the crucible of growing up in the midst of wealth that you know you'll inherit a disproportionately small amount of. Maybe that kind of audacity comes from dreaming dreams on stone pillows, instead of comfy carpets.

One of the themes I heard often at Mennonite Convention in Orlando, Florida this month was discomfort. This convention's planners were up front about the fact that many congregations and individual members of our denomination feel lost right now – unsure of what we share in common and unsure of what holds us together.

Many made the trip to convention knowing there would be discomfort ahead. But the convention planners decided not to try deny the discomfort, but to face it. They asked us to come together and lay our heads up on it, in hopes that the dreams provoked from the discomfort together might be dreams, like Jacob's, of assurance and a way forward.

Much of our formal time together at convention was spent in a Future Church Summit, in which several thousand Mennonites were invited to respond together to several days of questions about their hopes and dreams and lamentations for the church. They intentionally extended invitations such that groups in the church who have historically been disinvented underrepresented would be a part of the conversation and discernment. There were many, many more voices from the margins heard from mics and from main stages during the Summit than I have ever heard at an MCUSA gathering. The summit felt disproportionately white, which I was grateful to hear named and confessed at various points. Pink Mennos and queer Mennos and young Mennos were a more significant presence than at any time before in my observation.

And the discomfort of some was palpable. I could see the looks on some faces who were for the first time hearing fewer narratives from folks they perceived to be “like us.”

It was clear to me at the summit and convention there are some Jacob-Esau birthright and blessing dynamics going on in our denomination. A sense from many that a birthright has somehow been stolen; an inheritance that is rightfully theirs has switched hands. And a sense from many that the rightful blessing has been withheld for far too long; and that whatever blessing has been extended had to be fought for, and provoked

for, for far too time.

Each fears that the other will get and hold onto the firstborn privileges. And those fears are not ungrounded. There are some who feel the injustice is the perceived usurping of historical blessing/birthright and identity, and others who feel the injustice is the way the historical majority in the denomination has withheld the birthright blessing that was only ever God's to give. And they feel that comfort and time to process has been prioritized for too long, at the expense of those who continue to be excluded or marginalized.

The work that happened at convention was not perfect—the bonds within our denomination seem more fragile than I've known them to be. There are people deciding whether too much change is afoot, and people deciding whether not enough change is afoot, and a lot of people with a foot inching fearfully out the door.

In some senses, nothing changed at all in Florida. A resolution was passed, signaling to the Executive Board and MCUSA congregations a desire that the Future Summit conversations be paid attention to in future discernment. The resolution was initially worded so that the results of the Summit would give "direction" to Executive Board and MCUSA in its future decision-making, but that wording was removed in the last delegate session. No membership guidelines were removed or changed, no changes were proposed to the Confession of Faith; no polity was changed. But there's an anxiety much like Jacob's and Esau's at the end of today's story.

There's a sense that the birthright and blessing of our tradition were unfairly held for too long by some, and a sense that they have been stolen by others. No one seems to feel as if they're in secure possession of the birthright or blessing.

Perhaps an answer is in Jacob's dream: where God comes to Jacob, after Jacob has stolen then run away without his birthright. God blesses and reassures him, there on the hard ground, on his stone pillow, that HERE is where God is with him:

here in the leaving of home, God will not leave him.

here in the discomfort of no shelter and no home, God will not leave him.

here in the midst of shattered family relationships, God will not leave him

here where the reconciliation with brother is still years to come, God will not leave him.

The angels and messengers of God are constantly moving between earth and heaven, on that ladder of dreams – way more messengers, way more messages than could ever be for just one person.

Perhaps God is waiting to come to us on the strange and hard pillows we

improvise on our journeys away from the known. On our journeys fleeing our mistakes and broken relationships. Fleeing for our lives, in fear that our own brother intends our death.

Jacob's dream showed God's people, Jacob's people, as a multitude spanning north and south and east and west, busy being a blessing rather than hoarding it. I saw in Orlando a multitude gathered from east and west and north and south, left and right and center and fringe. I see a dream that was/is tantalizingly close. But we so easily devolve into squabbling over who is firstborn, whose name and traditions will be carried on, who will have control over the legacy and possessions of our family.

Perhaps God is waiting for all of us to abandon this fight over birthrights and inheritances, to abandon this pretense of owning and controlling the blessing of God, and to remember that it is all God's. The birthright is God's. The blessing is God's. It has never been ours to give or to receive, and it is definitely no one's to withhold or parcel out disproportionately. It is all of ours or none of ours. It is meant for the world. All of it.

Nothing was stolen in Orlando. And God promises to be with us all, here in this uncomfortable place.

(1) Terence E. Fretheim, "Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection." *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. p. 537.

(2) Fretheim, "Genesis." *NIB*. p. 538.

(3) Fretheim, "Genesis." *NIB*. p. p. 539.