

DRESSING UP LIKE JESUS  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 27:1-41  
Galatians 3:23-29

The 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis has its foundation in the principle known as primogeniture, which says that the oldest son gets most of the family inheritance, including the bestowal of the blessing from the father. The old patriarch Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. But Esau was the older, born a few minutes before his brother, and it is those few minutes that put him in line to receive the inheritance and the blessing. The blessing is spoken by the father, and once it is spoken, it cannot be recalled.

This is a rather long chapter, but it is one of the most powerfully crafted stories in the Bible. So sit back, and let the ancient Hebrew writer tell you a story.

[The scripture is read]

There is no more searing scene in all literature than that of Isaac and Esau, father and son, clinging together in grief and anger, for they have just figured out that they have been deceived by the younger son Jacob.

By this time Isaac is old, nearly blind, and maybe also suffering from the beginnings of dementia. At the very least he is disoriented and confused. So after he has blessed Jacob, thinking all along that he was blessing Esau, and when Esau appears to receive the same blessing, Isaac can only ask: "Who are you?" And when Esau tells him, we are told that Isaac "trembled violently," totally bewildered. As for Esau, he howls in anger and bitterness: "Bless me, me also, father!"

And so Isaac, never the sharpest crayon in the box, tries to improvise a blessing on the spot:

Away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be,  
and away from the dew of heaven

By your sword you shall live,  
and you shall serve your brother.

That's not much of a blessing, because Jacob has come and has stolen the true blessing by his deceit.

It is Jacob, the trickster, Jacob, whose name means one who bumps the other out of the way and takes his place. The story is told that when Rebecca was giving birth to these two boys, Jacob reached out from the womb to pull Esau back in so that he would be born first.<sup>1</sup> On that day Jacob was not successful, and Esau was born first. But on this day Jacob uses deceit and craftiness to take the blessing which belongs to the first born.

Jacob does it by taking advantage of his father's blindness and senility. He dresses himself up like Esau. Esau was a hairy man; Jacob was smoothed-skinned. So Jacob covered his arms and the back of his neck with goat skins, and secured the whole getup with duct tape. Esau was a man of the field, one who was never, shall we say, frequent in his bathing nor liberal in his use of deodorant. So Jacob got ahold of one of his shirts—the one Esau had gotten at Bonnaroo a couple of years back, and hadn't washed since—and put it on. Wearing this aromatic and comical garb, Jacob proceeds into the tent of his father Isaac. His heart must be going ninety to nothing.

Isaac is uncertain at first: “The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” Finally Isaac asks him directly: “Are you my son Esau?” And Jacob looks him in the eye and lies through his teeth: “I am.” And it works. Isaac places his hand upon him, and gives him the blessing:

May God give you the dew of heaven,  
and the fatness of the earth.  
Let peoples serve you,  
and nations bow down to you.

Jacob dresses up like Esau. He pretends to be Esau. And he becomes Esau. That is, he takes Esau's place. Jacob gets the blessing that should rightly belong to Esau. Esau was born first, but Jacob becomes the first born. It is such a complete change of place that even to this day when we name the patriarchs of Israel, we say Abraham and Isaac and—not Esau—but Jacob.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 25:26.

Granted, Jacob may not seem like a very good example of moral uprightness, tricking another person out of what belongs to him. But the old 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer John Calvin loved this story, for it reminded him of another story, our story. See if this sounds familiar: sinful people who do not deserve anything, clothe themselves in the garments of another, and so receive a blessing.

Here's how Calvin put it:

Jacob did not deserve the right of the first-born, but he concealed himself in his brother's clothing, so that he received the blessing while impersonating another. And we in like manner hide under the precious purity of our first-born brother Christ, so that we may be considered righteous in God's sight.<sup>2</sup>

It is not such a far-fetched image. We put on the clothes of Christ, and we are thereby counted as righteous. We become Christlike. The apostle Paul uses the image in Galatians: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ as a garment."

When the early Christian church baptized new believers, they would separate the men and women into two rooms. Those to be baptized would disrobe and would be baptized in, well, their birthday suits, for their baptism was like a new birthday, a second birth. Then as they would come out of the water, they would be clothed in a white robe, symbolic of putting on Christ.

We do the same thing when we put the white stole on babies who have been baptized. That stole is the clothing of Christ. And at death, we drape the casket in a white pall. Again it is the clothes of Christ, the white righteousness of Christ that celebrates the newness of life given in grace to the one who has died.

What we celebrate is a startling new reality: Like Jacob, we come into the presence of our Father undeserving. We, too, are rascals; we too at times are deceitful. There is no way we can lay claim to the blessing on our own. But then we put on the garments of our elder brother Christ. And we are given the blessing that belongs to Christ. God looks at our sinful selves, but sees Christ, and so blesses us.

There is a difference between Jacob's strategy and ours. Jacob dressed like his elder brother in the hopes of tricking his poor blind father. There is no way we can hope to

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, xi, 23.

deceive God by such a pathetic ploy. Indeed, it is God who invites us to dress in the garments of Christ. It is not we who do the trick; it is God who does the switch for us. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” says Paul in Romans, “but now we are justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

Cary Grant was one of the most elegant Hollywood actors of the past century. Handsome, suave and debonair, always well-dressed, even when he is trying to outrun that airplane in the classic movie “North by Northwest.” Cary Grant always looked good.

But Cary Grant did not start out that way. He was born Archie Leach, in a poor part of London, and grew up under tough circumstances. By hard work and good fortune he changed his name and his life to become the celebrated actor. Someone once asked him how he managed to make such a complete transformation. He replied: “I pretended to be the person I wanted to be, until I became that person. Or he became me.”<sup>4</sup>

We, dear friends, have become a new creation. And it’s not something we have to pretend to be, or something we work at. We are baptized, and it is done, by the grace of God in Christ. Our old rags are covered by the whiteness of Christ.

If we have put on Christ as a garment, if God looks at us and sees Christ, then doesn’t it also make sense for us to act like Christ?

It bothers us when someone dresses one way but acts another—the robber who dresses up in a Santa Claus suit and goes in and robs a 7-11. No—Santa Claus doesn’t do that. You can’t wear those clothes and do that.

So for us. We have been baptized. We belong to Christ. You don’t dress one way and act another. We have received the blessing of Christ. Now let’s act the part.✠

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:23-4.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000026/bio>.