

“The Machiavelli of Scripture”
Series: “In the Beginning...”
Genesis 27:5-17; Romans 9:6-16

It was composed as an attempt to curry favor and win a political appointment. In 1512, the Florentine, Niccolo Machiavelli, found himself exiled to his farm south of Florence, having bet on the wrong side in the political maneuver that returned the Medici family to power in Florence. Desperately seeking an entrée into Lorenzo de Medici’s administration, Machiavelli offered the gift of a book he wrote in honor of the man who came to be known as Lorenzo the Magnificent.

We do not know if Lorenzo even glanced at it. It certainly did nothing for Machiavelli. By 1527, he was dead, never regaining any semblance of political influence. The book, simply entitled, The Prince, was not published until four years after his demise.

Yet, almost 500 years later, it is considered one of the foundational books of western civilization. Of course, this popularity does not mean it is particularly admired. Quite the contrary, this treatise that enunciates how a prince, or political leader, can gain and retain power, is often referred to in the darkest light. Shakespeare used the author’s name to symbolize evil stage villains. The influential British philosopher Bertrand Russell branded The Prince “a handbook for gangsters.” Republican strategist, Lee Atwater, said he read it twenty-three times while Mafia godfathers ostensibly claim it as one of their favorite books.

These testimonials and confessions grow out of what many would call the diabolical advice Machiavelli gives to any prince seeking to win and advance political power. For instance, Machiavelli writes that “a prince, particularly a new prince, cannot afford to cultivate attributes for which men are considered good. In order to maintain the state, a prince will often be compelled to work against what is merciful, loyal, humane, upright, and scrupulous.”

Or, “A wise ruler cannot and should not keep his word when it would be to his disadvantage.”

Or, “Men must be either flattered or eliminated, because a man will readily avenge a slight grievance, but not one that is truly severe.”

Or, “How one lives and how one ought to live are so far apart that he who spurns what is actually done for what ought to be done will achieve ruin rather than his own preservation.”

Now, I bring this up because the story of Jacob’s maneuvering to receive Isaac’s blessing is much closer to The Prince than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Jacob and Esau are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac is the son of Abraham, the same son Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice, and then at the last minute God tells Abraham not to do it since he has proved his faith. The

genesis of God's promise to the Jews begins with Abraham, passes to Isaac, and then our story narrates whether it will continue through Jacob or Esau.

Early on, the Bible notes the conflict that will arise between the two brothers as they struggle in the womb to be the first born with Jacob holding onto Esau's heel at birth. This gives Esau the upper hand, the eldest son entitled to a double and preferential share of the inheritance. But we quickly discover that while Esau is bigger and stronger than Jacob, a better hunter and fighter, he is not quite as bright. Jacob is smarter, quicker, and more cunning. For instance, one day Esau came home famished. Jacob had made soup, a stew. Esau was so hungry he had to have something to eat. So Jacob said, "Will you trade me your birthright for the stew?" And Esau, thinking only of his immediate need, consents.

Plus, the story carries other complications. God has revealed to Rebekah, the mother, that the elder son will serve the younger son. And Genesis 25:28 tells us that Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Thus, as we come to our story, we can see that a Machiavellian dilemma is inevitable.

Our narrative begins with the patriarch Isaac on his deathbed. He calls in his eldest son, Esau, and directs him to go out and kill some game so that Esau can prepare a big meal for him, and then Isaac will give him the blessing reserved for the eldest son.

Now, to understand the story we must comprehend what is meant by a blessing. A spoken blessing carried a power and future all its own. Once given, it could not be taken back or altered. Otherwise, Isaac's blessing was destiny for the receiver.

Well, Rebekah overhears this conversation. So, she immediately finds Jacob, tells him of the episode and that they must deceive Isaac so Jacob will receive the coveted blessing. If Jacob will run out and get two baby goats, Rebekah will prepare Isaac's requested meal.

But Jacob, a conniver, yes, but a smart one says, "Wait a minute, Mom. How will I fool Dad? He may be blind, but Esau is a hairy man and my skin is like a new born baby. If my father discovered me trying to trick him, not only will he not give me the blessing, but he will curse me."

And Rebekah replies, "Don't worry about that, son. Let the curse be on me. Just do what I tell you."

So, they make the food, put animal skins on Jacob's arms and neck to make him feel hairy, and Jacob takes the food to Isaac asking for the blessing. But Isaac is immediately suspicious. First, he questions how Jacob, pretending to be Esau, so quickly found the game that he cooked. And as all of us can be known to do when put in a tight spot, Jacob uses God as his defense. "Oh, the Lord your God granted me this success," lies Jacob.

Still unconvinced, Isaac tells Jacob to come forward, and feels his arms and hands, admitting that though the voice was Jacob's, the hairy body was certainly Esau.

As Isaac eats and drinks, Jacob, undoubtedly looking over his shoulder for Esau, presses his father for the blessing. Deciding on one last test, Isaac orders Jacob to come near and kiss him. The blind man smells the scent of Esau, because Jacob is wearing Esau's clothes. Now convinced it is truly his eldest son, Esau, Isaac blesses Jacob with the promise of material wealth, political leadership and ruling over his brothers.

Upon receiving this, Jacob immediately scoots out of the tent right before Esau enters. Announcing his presence, Isaac asks, "Who are you?" As soon as Esau replies, "Your first born son, Esau," Isaac knows he has been deceived.

Describing the explosive emotions, verse thirty-three says, "then Isaac trembled violently." Both men, father and son, immediately understand what has occurred. Jacob, the younger son, has tricked his father out of his brother's birthright and blessing. A distraught Esau begs his father for any kind of blessing. But all Isaac can do is prophesy how Esau will earn his livelihood far from home with his sword. He will serve his younger brother, although the day will come when he will be free of this sibling burden.

It was the first day on the job for a new clerk in a supermarket. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from that goal, but she persisted. Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager."

He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine."

Later in the day, he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking and asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager replied, "My wife is from Toronto" — to which the boy said, "Oh, what team did she play for?"

The supermarket clerk and Jacob could have been brothers.

Interpreting this story is fraught with difficulties. Through the Machiavellian means of deceit and falsehood, Jacob obtains the blessing that will make him rich and most importantly, the repository of God's blessing to the people who will become the Jews.

As you can imagine, the story does not lack for interpretations. Some believe the narrative was told to explain the later geographic and ethnic delineations of the Jews and the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. Others interpret it as symbolizing the lengths the powerless must go to influence their existence. For instance, Rebekah is caught in a patriarchal system with no voice. Treated as an object, how can she influence events? Likewise, the second born

Jacob, though smarter and more capable, by law must bow to his older brother. How else could Jacob determine his own destiny?

Some believe Isaac was compliant in the ruse. Even though he was blind, surely he could tell the difference between Esau and Jacob. This little charade let him off the hook of choosing the youngest over the eldest, since he knew this was God's will.

Other commentators take specific elements of the story and find teaching moments within them. For instance, when Jacob brings God in on his treachery by saying God helped him quickly find the game for the meal, we recall Adam's response when God questions his eating of the forbidden fruit: "It was the woman *you* gave me..." The story reminds us how easily and conveniently we use God to justify our own wants, desires, and actions.

Or, should we see the story as a reminder to prepare our children for the future? As Isaac made ready for his death, the story urges us to write a will, give our children the gift of preparation for death, and passing on a spiritual heritage.

Or, maybe the story warns us about loving our children so much that we are willing to do anything to get them ahead. Are we sacrificing truth, family, or faith to push our children to some perceived plateau? The Machiavellian nature of the story opens the door to numerous interpretations.

A priest, a minister and a guru sat discussing the best positions for prayer, while a telephone repairman worked nearby. "Kneeling is definitely the best way to pray," the priest said. "No," said the minister. "I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven. You're both wrong," the guru said. "The most effective prayer position is lying down on the floor." The repairman could contain himself no longer. "Hey, fellas," he interrupted. "The best prayin' I ever did was when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

Interpreting this story is kind of like deciding the best position for prayer. Except its realistic twists and turns remind us that we most fervently seek God during those periods of life when we are hanging upside down from life's telephone poles.

Understanding that a story such as this opens itself to numerous interpretations, I want to enunciate two aspects of the saga that I believe stand at its core. First, a person pays for his or her deceit.

This act of treachery brings consequences. Jacob comes to be seen as an immoral conniver. Isaac becomes bitter. Esau wants to kill Jacob. Jacob is exiled and suffers at the hands of another person just like him. A terrible breach is brought into the family.

There are those who defend Rebekah's actions by noting that she had been told by God that Jacob would rule Esau. So, by her decisions, she believed she was carrying out the will of God. But do we believe the end always justifies the means?

In the story, a blessing is like a shot arrow. It cannot be taken back. Yet, one participates in how the blessing becomes manifest. Notice in the story that when his mother describes the treachery to Jacob, he doesn't tell her the plan is morally repugnant, he is only afraid of getting caught and suffering the consequences.

But though he does not get caught, he still suffers the consequences. Deceit becomes Jacob's lifelong mode of operation, both for him and those who surround him. His father-in-law tricks him into marrying both his daughters, and working fourteen years to get them. His own sons deceive him about the supposed death of his favorite son, Joseph, the one with the fancy coat. This story illustrates how the trickster develops a pattern of actions that forever ensnares him into a continuing web of deceitful living.

In 1766, Harvard's Harvard Hall burned down. It housed the library. Everything was lost — including all the books given by John Harvard. President Holyoke, standing by the smoldering ashes was devastated. The precious library, the only link with John Harvard lost — on his watch.

Legend has it that a student approached him. He had a confession. No one was supposed to take books out of the library. But he had taken one out. And he handed it to President Holyoke.

Well, the President was ecstatic. A link with John Harvard was preserved. He was so thankful. They rejoiced together. But, then he reminded the student one was not to take books out of the library. So he said, "You're expelled."

Like the student, Jacob did a bad thing, which turned out to be a good thing, but he still paid the price for his wrong actions. Even if we believe the end justifies the means, we can be certain the means will eventually catch up with us.

The second element of the story I want us to see is what I think is its true teaching. The incident announces that though God's will may take detours, it will always be accomplished. And to bring that will to fruition, God employs less than perfect people.

Sometimes Jacob is deceitful and self-serving. Other times he humbly and fervently seeks God. Otherwise, he is exactly like you and me. The story's author wants us to look at Jacob and say, "If God can use Jacob to do his will, God can surely use me."

This knowledge is a great comfort and inspiration. Each and every one of us is a flawed, sinful human being. Yet, the power of God's desire can and will be made manifest through the lives of God's people. We come this morning, fully cognizant of the deceit of our lives, yet here in this place, God confirms that if we are willing, God will reach down and bless us with the power to bring about His will.

If you are my age, or older, you will recall the name Wilma Rudolph. Born prematurely as the twentieth of twenty children, she was not expected to live. She did, but at age four contracted double pneumonia and scarlet fever, which caused

her left leg to become paralyzed. But at age nine, she removed the leg brace upon which she had depended for five years and began walking without it. At age thirteen, she developed a rhythmic walk, which the doctors said was a miracle. She also decided to begin running, entered her first race and came in last. For the next three years, she came in dead last in every race she entered. But she persevered until the day she finally won a race.

By 1960, she represented the United States in the Rome Olympics, where she became the first American woman to win three gold medals and by breaking or tying world records in each won the title of “the fastest woman in the world.”

Every one of us encounters obstacles, some thrust upon us, and some we create for ourselves. But if we persevere. If we continue seeking and working toward God’s will, Almighty God will bless our efforts and we will be a part of the divine plan.

“The Machiavelli of Scripture”

Jacob certainly deserves the title “The Machiavelli of Scripture.” Deceit and lying stand front and center in his life. Yet, there is another side of him seeking to fulfill God’s promises, to do God’s will. The story reminds us of the seemingly contradictory facets of the enigma of the divine will and our place within its trajectory. Jacob’s saga recalls the up and down, back and forth, nature of our own lives — of our marriages, jobs, child rearing, sibling and parental relationships, and spiritual journey. Life is often not pretty. But through it all, God is here, seeking to work his will through you and me.

This morning, as we begin a new year, let us affirm and take comfort in the fact that Almighty God is here, seeking to accomplish his will through this church. And let us commit ourselves to opening our hearts and minds to hear those divine directions and promises, certain that if we do, as imperfect as we may be, this year God can accomplish that divine will through you and me.

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