"Honoring Our Birthright ", reflections on the lectionary for Pentecost 7, Year A by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, July 12, 2026 for St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

"So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob…Thus Esau despised his birthright." (Genesis 25: 33-34)

"But as for the seed which was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty." (Matt. 13: 23)

As this summer unfolds, we find ourselves balancing our daily lives in this beautiful part of the world that is fully alive and richly fruitful at this time of year, with the continuously trying national climate and the uncertainty and excitement of our parish's movement into an active search process. These are unsettled and yet tender times. We have come through a year of conversations and self-examination as a faith community— a year that asked much of our patience, our courage, and our willingness to listen to one another. Now we stand at the beginning of the more formal search process, a season when we long for clarity but must live with holy ambiguity. And all of this unfolds against the backdrop of a nation wrestling with fear, polarization, and loud religious voices that claim certainty and dominance in ways that do not reflect the gospel we know.

Into this moment, our lectionary offers us stories that speak directly to our condition — stories about spiritual hunger, about discernment, and about what grows in us when the world feels unstable. Today's readings — Esau selling his birthright and Jesus' parable of the sower — are ancient stories, but they have a surprising resonance for a congregation navigating transition, healing, and hope in an unsettled and chaotic historical context.

The story of Jacob and Esau is an ancient story about God's unfolding promises to Abraham and his descendants, fraught with family conflict, sibling rivalry, parental favoritism and all the stuff of age old family and national drama. It is also a story about how nations came to be, one favored and the other not, and yet even the "unfavored" nation is seen to be beloved of God in its own way. This is a history written by the victors, so Jacob's nation is presented as the favored one, but also as one that, notwithstanding its status as "chosen," has its origins in deception, trickery and a little foul play. The nation may be "chosen" but it is also deeply flawed. And the lesser nation, the Edomites, descendants of Esau are seen to be those whose patriarch "despised his birthright" and yet an abundant nation came forth from that choice and thrived in its own right.

Esau, as the firstborn of Isaac, was entitled by birth to a double portion of his father's wealth. The laws of primogeniture in Ancient Near Eastern culture conferred favored status on first born sons and Esau would have enjoyed the benefits of that status upon Isaac's death had he not sold his birthright to his twin brother Jacob. What seems initially so bizarre about this story is how petty and inconsequential the circumstances prompting the sale of the birthright appear to be. Esau has been out working in the fields and comes in famished from his labors. His brother has prepared a delicious stew and he

wants some. When he asks for a bowl of stew, Jacob says, "First sell me your birthright." Esau claims to be "dying" swears away his birthright and gets his bowl of stew.

What a weird story. It seems so ridiculous for Esau to throw away significant and substantial rights to wealth and status in the community and the family for a measly bowl of stew! Especially since he most certainly wasn't dying, not even close. He was young and healthy and hungry from a day of hard labor, but by no means in peril of truly perishing from hunger. He gave up his privilege as the first born, but why? He comes in from the field exhausted, depleted, and says he is "dying." His hunger and exhaustion distort his judgment. Urgency masquerades as clarity. And in that vulnerable moment, he trades away something precious — not because he is foolish, but because he is worn down.

Many of us know that feeling. After conflict, after months of uncertainty, after absorbing the anxiety of the world around us, we too can become spiritually hungry to the point of being spiritually anxious and worn down. We want quick fixes. We want easy answers. We want a new priest who will solve everything. We want relief. We want things to go back to the way they were at some point in the past that we remember fondly.

But Esau's story reminds us that hunger or exhaustion is a dangerous place from which to make decisions. Discernment requires steadiness, patience, and the willingness to breathe before we bargain away what matters most. Esau is not thinking clearly because he is depleted. And depletion is something this community understands. Conflict drains energy. Transition unsettles us. National anxiety wears us down. Hunger — spiritual, emotional, communal — makes us vulnerable to choices that promise immediate comfort but could undermine long-term health. Esau teaches us that discernment under pressure might be dangerous. It can result in false clarity born of fatigue. When we are hot and hungry we grasp for a quick fix, which might not be what we truly need.

"Thus Esau despised his birthright." Those are haunting words. We don't tend to talk about "birthrights" except in the context of immigration, but as people created in the image of God, we do have a birthright that deserves honoring and it isn't about what nationality we can claim. The most fundamental birthright of all is life itself and our citizenship in the collective we call humankind. We were born, we were given life. We didn't choose to be born, we didn't choose to live in this time in history or in a particular place on the globe. Life landed on us as gift. The gift of life itself is the birthright and we can choose to honor that gift of life or to "despise" it as Esau did, letting temporal priorities or challenges get in the way of things eternal and lasting. Esau's story calls us to honor our birthright, as Christians, as members of this parish, as citizens of this country. Honoring that birthright brings with it a call to leadership and responsibility to the world we have been born in to and the epoch in which God chose us to be born.

Our birthright as Christians is the invitation to participate in the abundant life that God offers to all of us. In the parable of the sower, we are reminded that God scatters the seed of God's love widely and indiscriminately. The parable is not about judging soil types; it's about God's reckless commitment to sowing even when conditions are unstable. God doesn't just limit Godself to those people or places where God could reasonably expect

seeds to take root and grow. The sower in the parable casts the seed all over the place, on rocks, in thorns, on the sidewalk, in the parking lot, leaving open the possibility that in all the unlikeliest of places the seed might find good soil and produce fruit. This parable encourages us to take risks and to avoid making judgments about where the good soil is and where not.

This year, the thorns feel especially sharp. Fear-driven political rhetoric crowds out hope and sows division. Christian nationalism distorts the gospel into something narrow and coercive. Many progressive Christians feel spiritually displaced, unsure where they fit in the religious landscape. And yet — God keeps sowing. The good soil is not found in places of certainty or dominance. It is found in communities willing to do slow, patient work. It is found in congregations like ours, tending trust, rebuilding relationships, and preparing to welcome new leadership with courage rather than fear. It is found in congregations like ours that have a deep and abiding commitment to serving the community in which we live in all its diversity and difference, without judgment, and with love. We cannot fix everything in the world, but we are the good soil here in Penn Yan as we serve our community faithfully.

Both the story of Jacob and Esau and Jesus' parable of the sower involve people dealing recklessly with things of value. Esau gives away his birthright for a bowl of stew. The sower in the parable flings seed around all over the place, apparently not bothering to determine whether the place it lands is likely to be fruitful. The sower in Jesus' parable is generous to a fault, flinging precious seed all over the place, trusting that it may produce fruit in some pretty unlikely places. This generosity is the antidote to the scarcity mindset that conflict and national anxiety can create. The sower does not panic when the landscape is unstable. God the divine sower keeps sowing. God keeps trusting that something good can grow even now.

This contrast is powerful in the year of our Lord, 2026. Esau's recklessness is driven by fear, depletion, and short-term thinking. The sower's recklessness is driven by hope, trust, and long-term vision. One is rooted in scarcity. The other in abundance. One is reactive. The other is patient and optimistically proactive. One is about grasping for a quick fix. The other is about giving generously trusting in God's promise of abundance and showing resilience in challenging times.

This contrast is the choice before us as a parish. Will we grasp for quick fixes? Or will we sow generously, trusting that God is already at work in us and will produce fruit in places and ways we cannot yet see? Will we honor our birthright as a parish that has always reached beyond its doors to serve the world in Christ's name? In this season of transition, let us resist the temptation to grasp for bowls of stew. Let us refuse to imitate the loudest voices in the public square. Let us honor our birthright — our identity as beloved children of God — by living our baptismal promises with integrity and hope. Let us remember who we are – Christians bound by our promises to respect the dignity of every human being and to strive for justice and peace in all that we do in our parish and in our community and nation. Let us choose the reckless optimism of our God the sower who is already planting seeds in the most unlikely of places. AMEN.