Since the death of my father-in-law, Bill O’Brien, back in February, Kim and I have redone our wills and gotten all our important paperwork and passwords together in one place to make it easier on our kids when we pass.

All of this is necessary because we live on this side of the Jacob and Esau story. You see, we see our three kids as co-equal heirs and don’t want them going through any of these biblical shenanigans to see who would inherit the birthright or blessing from us.

If you would understand this story from Genesis about the sibling rivalry between the older and younger sons of Isaac and Rebekah, you need to realize what’s behind it. And in the end, you will find out some things about how God works that might disturb or delight you, depending on how you look at it.

What’s behind it is the law of primogeniture. This literally means that the firstborn son receives all—or at least 2/3—of the inheritance of the father, as well as his blessing. I can just imagine telling my amazing daughters—Cameron and Jillian—that their brother, Rhett, is inheriting the entirety of our “massive” fortune and that I have designated him alone to be the one to carry the potency of my loins to the next generation. Right. If that were my intent, the woman I live with would immediately go Rebekah all over this. She’d be scheming behind the scenes to see that the girls got their due.

Ancient religions that preceded Israel—not just in the Near East but also as far away as India and Polynesia—held that humans were descended from the gods and that there was a hierarchy of order in which firstborn males were more godlike than others because they possessed the greatest degree of divine potency and therefore privilege. This is why kings of every culture prayed for a legitimate male heir to pass the monarchy to, even if a girl or a boy from an illicit relationship were born first. So much intrigue ensued in every royal family over this. And some of the best-loved Netflix
series, too, don’t you know?! The Bible is the story of God’s redemptive work in the world. But once we say that, we should ask, redeemed from what and for what? Here we see how God overturns an oppressive social system that excluded some in favor of others. That’s the hidden message of this seemingly scandalous tale of the scurrilous Jacob stealing the birthright from Esau and God going along with it!

So, what’s God up to in this story? Let’s look closer.

Esau was named Esau because he was hairy, which is what the name means. He ended up being a hunter and his daddy loved the game he came home with. Rebekah had a different game in mind. When Jacob came out second, he was smooth; it turns out he was a smooth operator. They named him Jacob because it means heel. He was probably grabbing at Esau’s heel, as if to try to drag him back in so he could be first. The word heel in Hebrew has the same double meaning it does in English. Jacob was a trickster, a usurper or supplanter, a con man who looked out for his own interest. And Rebekah enabled him, justifying it as a divine mandate that God had tipped her off to when the boys were kicking in her womb.

Jacob cons his brother out of his birthright. He seizes his moment, no doubt with the aid of his mother. When Esau comes in from hunting one day, he is famished. Jacob has prepared his State-Fair-award-winning-five-alarm-Texas chili. (No awards this year, sadly, as the Fair is cancelled.) Esau can’t resist. Gimme some of that red stuff, he says. Hardly a foodie, that Esau.

A few years ago, the comedienne Tina Fey did a commercial where she was standing in a grocery store checkout line and was so hungry that she grabbed for a bag of chips and started eating right there in the line. Turns out she had pulled a package of potpourri instead. Yummy.

It’s best not to make life-changing decisions when you’re desperately hungry. Esau would have done just about anything for that stew. Jacob made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Esau sold his birthright for a “mess of pottage,” as the King James Version put it. And my, my, the mess that followed.
Esau would live the rest of his life with the humiliating smell of that stew in his nostrils. And Jacob would too, because this set off a chain of events that took a lifetime to resolve, as we learn from reading on. Jacob wouldn’t settle just for Esau’s birthright; he and his mother conspired to steal Isaac’s blessing from Esau, too—which meant that the power of procreation and prosperity would flow primarily to Jacob.

This hardly seems fair. Until you realize that primogeniture itself was far from fair.

Here’s where it gets more interesting. God chose Jacob and not Esau to carry forward the promises made to Abraham and Sarah. This offends our moral sensibilities, doesn’t it? Not that Esau was any paragon of virtue, mind you. He was entirely uncaring about important things—being preoccupied with his hunting and his hunger. So, don’t be like Esau. But Jacob? He was a world-class cad. Don’t be like Jacob either. We could say the same for Isaac and Rebekah: don’t be like them. And yet, God uses this family to bless the world. Go figure.

St. Augustine used this story of God choosing Jacob and not Esau as a typology of salvation by grace alone, not by works. It was precisely because Jacob was so undeserving that he became the father of nations. Grace brings about virtue, Augustine said, not the other way round. And there’s something to that.

But then he went on to say that the part about God foretelling all this to Rebekah reveals a doctrine of predestination. Here’s how that works: if it’s all about God and not us—divine grace, not human merit, then God must have determined everything beforehand. Which means God chose some of us in Jacob to be saved and the rest of us in Esau to be damned.

That’s a damnable and damaging doctrine. It has infected the church ever since and continues to divide the world into the saved and the lost, the blessed and the cursed, the insider and the outsider. It’s the same dynamic that keeps churches deciding who is worthy to preside, who may serve the elements, or even who may eat at the Lord’s Table. Goodness, what a mess of pottage!

Where Augustine went wrong
was this: God’s choosing Jacob rather than Esau was not about election for salvation; it was about election for mission. Instead of authorizing the church to proclaim a whole new world of discrimination through the winner by grace, which was Jacob, it was meant to do just the opposite.

By choosing the second child, God was overturning the world’s culture of preference for the firstborn. By choosing a family of nomads to stand at the riverhead of faith, God was overturning the world’s culture of preference for the rich and powerful. By choosing people of questionable character, God was overturning the world’s preference for separating everyone into categories of good and bad.

Here’s the genius of God and the really good news: when you start from the outskirts, from the fringes, from the forsaken of the world and move inward toward the center where God is, you don’t miss anyone. This is the way God works. Everyone is chosen, everyone is loved, everyone is included. Even you.

Have you ever wondered why God came to save us through a man who was from a minority group? A Jew who was considered marginal by the powerbrokers of his time? A man born under a cloud of suspicion about his conception to a young woman and her husband from the hinterlands of Galilee? And why is it that our salvation is linked to his being lynched on a tree? Because this is how God works.

And this is how the church must work, too, if it wants to claim to be the church of Jesus Christ. The church must side with those who have been silenced and sidelined, those who have suffered and been segregated among us. The church in America will truly understand its own salvation only when we join God in the way God works.

Right now, the hope for the church in America is found in hearing the voices of Black and Latinx and Native American and LGBTQ and differently-abled persons—all of whose lives matter, too. Listen to me carefully: there is no such thing theologically as the white church; that is a cultural construct of our own making. It has given preferred authority to white, straight, married men and all those who would cooperate with that hierarchy of order, despite what it has meant to our
overall spiritual condition or to the way we have influenced the wider culture.

How many of you fit that definition? See how narrow that is, that you should have to depend upon people like me to feel fully loved and included in the heart of God?

When we find ourselves defending cultural assumptions that keep some people in charge over others because of flimsy ideas of superiority due to birth order, marital status, skin color, whatever, we are resisting the work of God that wants to liberate us all and make us all truly siblings of the Spirit in a great, wide, diverse and glorious community of faith.

The church has been missing the point entirely for entirely too long. God has not called us to be protectors of privilege, defenders of civilizations built on the backs of the oppressed. We have good news to tell and to live together.

And together we are doing just that, Wilshire. Because we are all of us loved and blessed and included. All of us. EveryBody. Praise be to God. Amen.