

November 4, 2018
Lesson 10: A Troubled Birth
Scripture: Gen. 25:19-34

Context:

Last week's lesson focused on the story of Isaac finding a wife and taking a place in the story of the patriarchs. Yet his part of the story is more complicated as he gives birth not to one son, but to two sons. The other examples thus far we have seen in Genesis have not exactly been the paragon of great fraternal relations as Cain and Abel did not fare too well and nor did Isaac and Ishmael.

The text even goes to suggest as much even in the birth narrative of Isaac's sons. Both Isaac and Rebekah pray to have children, but continue to not conceive. Yet the prayers are answered and Rebekah becomes pregnant, not with one son, but twins.

However, the situation is anything but ideal. As Rebekah feels the babies fighting in her womb, she asks the Lord what this could possibly mean. The response is anything but reassuring as the Lord tells her that she has two separate nations in her womb and that the older will serve the younger. This is hardly the prenatal check-up that you want to walk into.

Once the children are born, they are as different as can be with both their looks and their interests being far apart from one another. The first-born is a hairy baby clothed with red hair. The second child to come from the womb grasping the heel of his brother is Jacob. The grasp of the heel is an allusion as to what will come and how the brothers will always be reliving their pre-world debut. All of this happens while Isaac begins to go into his sixties.

The next part of their story plows past their childhood and adolescence and into the time of their later teenage years or even twenties. As one would expect even with twins, the brothers are as different from one as can be. Esau with his ruddiness and hairy body becomes an outdoorsman while his brother Jacob stays closer to the home probably assisting with the livestock and helping with the animals. Both are needed positions in the ancient world, yet both are very different.

Here we see an inversion to the natural order when one uses their gifts to seize something that might be believed to belong to the other. As Esau comes from field and sees a red stew cooking, he demands to receive some of it. Jacob tells him he will only receive it if he gives birthright. Esau agrees by giving his birthright by word and then proceeds to eat and leave the setting. Clearly, Esau did not care as much for his birthright.

The text is fascinating in that we never hear of the motivations for why the characters do what they do. Why would Esau give up his birthright, the inheritance of everything for a bowl of stew just after he's been in the field? Why would Jacob instigate something and what was his intent in getting his birthright from his brother? These are good questions that will always loom when reading the text.

The biggest note of the narrative though is the character of Jacob. Here he is seen as a trickster figure, a character that receives what they desire through sneaky behavior. Tricksters are those are not quite protagonists, nor are they antagonists. They are not entirely evil, but they're also not very good. One could see a clear difference between grandfather Abraham and this mischievous grandson who does not exhibit as much of the

righteousness and godliness of his family line. Yet Jacob is important to God's story and he will be the one who is the major spiritual ancestor of the tribes of Israel, from which he will derive his name. And it all started with exchanging a bowl of stew for all the glory and the promises.

Application

According to the purpose statement in the curriculum, the point of this story is to acknowledge that long-standing conflicts often have deep roots. In the case of Jacob and Esau, that is very true. Ever since they were young, the two have had the prophecy looming over their heads that the younger will supplant the older. Their differences in interests and even looks probably did not help the matter.

Often conflicts start at as they did with Esau and Jacob with just tiny details or things happening such as Jacob grasping at Esau's heel when their mother was giving birth to them. Yet over time, even the smallest things can begin a domino effect where eventually a conflict brews that one could see over time. The roots are often planted perhaps innocuously, but then they are nurtured over time maybe without the parties realizing everything that is taking place until a major conflict appears on the horizon. Thus, we see what happens in this story leading to a place that will not be pretty and a place where all parties will get hurt.

It can be hard to be in the middle of a conflict to be self-aware enough to discern the next steps. Yet it becomes part of our Christian witness to be aware of the feelings we possess and how they internalize within our being. It might mean that like Esau, we should probably stop for a minute before we go off the handle. Or if we are like Jacob, we might examine our motivation for doing certain things and ask if this is good or not. Have you ever done something you knew would lead to trouble? What were the signs you were about to enter a conflict where you played a role? What are the warning signs within yourself that you are about to lash out or perhaps be impulsive?

Regardless though of how self-aware we may be and regardless of whether we handle conflict well or not, things will happen and we will mess up. The story of Esau and Jacob demonstrates on the part of both characters that we will not always make the best choices and that even unambiguous motives can still lead to harm. In the case of Jacob and Esau, God uses both as part of story of Israel. Even though Jacob proceeded to take his brother's birthright and continue on to steal his brother's blessing by their father Isaac, God still made him the father of Israel and used him to carry the family line. Jacob was a trickster, but he was God's trickster.

Luckily for us, we also see that conflicts do not always end with complete destruction and separation. A spoiler for this story is that Esau and Jacob reconcile. Even though they fought and lost each other for a period of time, when they are reunited, Esau shows love and mercy. We are reminded even in the midst of the most intense conflicts, God can bring in reconciliation and forgiveness. What is a relationship God might be calling you to tend to and address? What conflict has been brewing where you might need to get involved and be proactive? What are ways you can reconcile with a brother or sister that would help both of you?

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