

Family Matters: When You Can't Forget

Genesis 25:19-34
Romans 8:1-11

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Faith Community

John O'Donohue, an Irish teacher and poet wrote, "The beginning often holds the clue to everything that follows."¹ That, I think, is the perfect one-sentence introduction to the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau.

Their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, like their grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, had been unable to conceive, and so they did what any wise couple would do:

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife....The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. (Genesis 25:21, TNIV)

Abraham and Sarah were promised descendants as numerous as stars in the sky, but it took twenty five years for the first twinkle to show up. In this case, Isaac prayed. He and Rebekah waited twenty years and then, twins. Right away we can tell there's something unusual going on.

The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord.

The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." (vv. 22-23)

"The beginning often holds the clue to everything that follows."

The big day comes and Esau is the firstborn, but then immediately comes Jacob, holding on to big brother's heel, and what's up with that? Twins perhaps, but twins who couldn't have been more different from one another, each with his own qualities that draw Mom and Dad into the drama.

Esau was a hunter. He was a tough, rugged, hairy guy who would proudly bring home his latest kill. Dad really liked that. Jacob, well, not so much. He was more of a home

¹ John O'Donohue: To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings (New York, Doubleday, 2008), p. 186

body, quiet and sensitive. Rebekah took to him. The Bible puts it this way:

Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (v. 28)

And as John Ortberg said, there's a world of hurt in that one sentence and, indeed, a world of hurt followed.

This is the third in a series we're calling "Family Matters," and right away I need to point out a few things.

- First of all, there's no such thing as a perfect family, so we can all relax.
- Here's something else I know: you have hopes and dreams for your family, whatever your marital status may be, whether you have kids or not, and sometimes you spend a great deal of time worrying, second guessing, or 'if only-ing' over those whom you love. That's pretty normal too.
- Here's one more: there are few things more heart wrenching to deal with than pervasive conflict within a family.

The boys grow, and we pick up the story with Esau coming home from a hunt, hungry in a big way, and Jacob hanging out at home, making dinner.

Esau isn't just hungry; instead, he's in such a state that he fears for his survival. Is he being a bit of a drama king here, a little over the top? A doctor in my home church told me one day that there's a medical condition that could very well have been at work here, so this may not have been an exaggeration. Jacob, for his part, sees his opportunity.

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. (vv. 31-33)

A family's inheritance was divided into the number of sons plus one. The eldest son got that extra share, along with rights to leadership of the family and the general status that comes with being firstborn. Esau, in his desperation, gave it all to little brother.

As the story continues, Esau, bitter from the raw deal he fell for, and knowing that he's on the outside looking in as far as Mom is concerned, takes two wives from outside the tribe, a slap in the face to family tradition. Genesis takes one sentence to describe the impact of that move:

They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.
(26:35)

Scroll ahead even father, and we see Isaac, the boys' father, nearing the end of his life. His vision is shot and his memory is not what it used to be, but he still wants to mend fences with Esau. He asks him to go hunt some wild game for him so they can have one last meal together and he'll give Esau his final blessing.

There's a fly on the wall, however, in the form of Rebekah. She overhears this and sets Jacob up to pull the proverbial wool over Isaac's feeble eyes. Their scheme works, Jacob gets the blessing meant for his brother, and Esau is left out in the cold one more time.

Esau begs for some kind of blessing of his own, come on, Dad, throw me a bone here, and what he gets is more of a prophecy that spells trouble.

Both of Isaac's sons will become fathers of nations. Jacob will continue the line that began with Abraham and results in Israel itself. Esau's lineage will be the Edomites, and the two nations will be at odds for centuries.

On the short term,

Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob." (27:41)

Rebekah picks up on that one as well, and helps Jacob plan his escape, deceiving Isaac one last time.

This story of Jacob and Esau goes all the way through to chapter 35 of Genesis, with enough intrigue, twists and turns to satisfy any adventurous soul, and you would do well to check it out yourself, especially since we'll continue it next week.

For a bit of a preview, however, please understand that as long as you're drawing breath, the story of your family is not over, whatever shape it may be in. You'll see it in this

one how God leads Jacob and Esau in their years to come, and you just might see something in yourself or in your family that'll speak to you through this all too human drama.

Remember also, friends, the Bible is as relevant and current as the latest CNN home page. And what it tells us is that God can take extremely fallible and crazy family situations and work wonders in them. The apostle Paul tells us why:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

This story offers hope to all of us who have ever regretted, second guessed or grieved over our family situations.

Remember this as well:

But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:10-12)