

Conflict is an inevitable part of our lives on this earth. Whether with our spouse or children, family or friends, co-workers or bosses, and even with fellow Christians and fellow church goers, we cannot avoid conflict. Beyond it being inevitable, it can at times be necessary. Through conflict, we are able to progress. Innovation comes oftentimes through a conflict of ideas. Growth comes with growing pains, one of which can be conflict. Conflict can be as simple as a difference of opinions or as complex as a world war. But regardless of the level of conflict, unresolved conflict can have serious consequences. At Church Council Meeting this week, Arlis shared a devotional about conflict from Pastor Rick Warren. He notes three consequences of holding on to conflict for too long:

- 1) Blocks our fellowship with God.
- 2) Hinders our prayers.
- 3) Hinders our happiness.

As Christians, we aren't called to eliminate conflict; unfortunately, that is only going to come when Jesus comes again. Rather, we are called to work through conflict in a way that gives honor to the name of Jesus. However, if the ways in which Christians continue to respond online to national crises and the political climate in America, not to mention the rising divorce rates and the volume of church splits that happen every year are any indication, we aren't any better at conflict resolution than non-Christians. In fact, we may even be worse because we claim to follow a God who has taught us to bring peace to conflict, yet we choose instead to follow what we see demonstrated by our culture in conflict, by eschewing hatred rather than love, pride rather than humility, violence rather than non-violence, gossip rather than silence, hard-hearts rather than soft-hearts.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that "Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

Last week, Dick introduced to us the concept of reconciliation, that God has called us ambassadors of reconciliation, meaning that we are representatives of the peace-bringing work of God to this world at war. What does it mean then for us to be ambassadors of reconciliation? Today, we are going to use the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau and the conflict that ripped their family apart as a model for understanding different roles in conflict, different approaches to conflict resolution, and, and the journey towards reconciliation.

**Transition:** First, let's take a look at the characters in this story and think about the different roles that we may have in conflict.

### **I. Our roles in Conflict:**

**1) Esau:** The victim. Esau was deceived twice by his brother Jacob, the second time who was prompted by his mother Rebekah. And because of these two deceptions, Esau would now receive none of the blessings that were traditionally due to the oldest child in that culture. Now, Esau was no innocent victim, as we will talk about later, and Jacob was prophesied to rule over his older brother, but I don't believe it was in God's plan to use a deceitful means of making this happen.

**2) Jacob:** The main antagonist. Jacob was the main party that stole Esau's birthright and blessing, and although his mother certainly encouraged and aided in the process, he ultimately made the decision to go ahead with the plans which would lead to the conflict with Esau.

**3) Rebekah:** Assistant, encourager, plotter. Rebekah was not the main antagonist in the conflict, but she certainly played a major role throughout Jacob's life in favoring him, in reminding him of God's promise, and especially in helping him deceive Isaac. She may have thought that she was doing the right thing in speeding along God's work by getting Jacob the blessing, but ultimately her work led to more conflict and more problems.

**4) Isaac:** Unwitting participant. It was Isaac's blessing that would send this situation over the tipping point, but because he was old, crippled, and blind, he didn't exactly know what he was doing, although he suspected that something was up. He certainly played his part by favoring Esau over Jacob, but ultimately he was used for other people's ends.

Victim, Antagonist, Assistant, Unwitting Participant. These certainly aren't the only roles that people may take in conflict, but certainly things we can relate to. In fact, I would bet that all of us have played these roles at various points in time, whether or not we would like to admit it.

**Transition:** So, through the characters we can see different roles that we might play in conflict. What can they teach us about approaches to conflict resolution?

**II. Our Roles in Conflict Resolution:** How do we approach conflict? How did the characters of the story approach conflict?

**1) Esau:** Immediate and reactive. Esau doesn't hide his feelings, he wears his heart on his sleeve. I imagine some of you can relate to this. He is also explosive and violent. His solution to the conflict was to murder his own brother. Now, I hope that none of you have ever threatened to murder anyone, least of all a family member, but I'm sure that some of you can relate to that angry, explosive impulse.

**2) Jacob:** Avoidance, running away, and not taking responsibility. Because of Esau's threats against Jacob, Rebekah had him flee to live with her brother Laban. She believed he would only be there a short while before he would return; what she didn't know is that it would be 25 years before the brothers would meet again. Mennonites can sure relate to the conflict resolution strategy of avoidance, as they are historically the kings and queens of passive-aggressive behavior.

**Transition:** Now, we've looked at some examples of roles in conflict as well as conflict resolution strategies found in the characters of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. The question we turn to now is this: What would God have us learn about reconciliation from this story?

John Paul Lederach, in his book "Reconcile" wrote that what we learn from Jacob and Esau is that

"Reconciliation is a journey, an encounter, and a place. God calls us to set out on this journey through conflict, marked by places where we see the face of God, the face of the enemy, and the face of our own selves." (Lederach 43) In order to discover for ourselves what true Christian reconciliation looks like in

the face of conflict, we are going to look at the story of Jacob and Esau through Lederach's lens of reconciliation as journey, encounter, and place.

**A) Reconciliation as a Journey: "Ultimately, reconciliation is a journey toward and through conflict. In this instance, God does not promise to do the work for Jacob. God does not promise that he will take care of everything and level the road for Jacob. God promises to accompany him, to be present."**  
-Lederach, 42

1) Reconciliation is a Journey Toward Conflict: There were several important events that led to the climactic conflict event of Jacob tricking Isaac.

i. Prophecy of Jacob's place as second twin: Rebekah, like Isaac's mother Sarah, was barren and unable to conceive. Isaac pleads on her behalf and God gifts them with pregnancy. But something doesn't seem right, as the babies are wrestling together in the womb. Rebekah asks God, "what's going on?" And this is how He replies (**Genesis 25:23**): "The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger."

Rebekah could have already guessed that this was going to cause conflict. It was culturally traditional that the oldest son would be favored, and so to go against that would cause great strife in the family.

Warren Wiersbe notes in his commentary on the OT that: "The fact that God had already determined to give the covenant blessings to Jacob didn't absolve anybody in the family from their obligations to the Lord. They were all responsible for their actions, because divine sovereignty doesn't destroy human responsibility. In fact, knowing that we're the chosen of God means we have a greater responsibility to do His will." (Wiersbe 97)

ii. Favoritism between parents: Not only were the seeds planted for conflict in that God was reversing traditions related to parental blessings, but Isaac and Rebekah also played favorites with their children, which would later encourage Rebekah's deceit and Isaac's refusal to follow God's choosing of Jacob. "Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob." Gen. 25:28

iii. Jacob steals Esau's birthright: Genesis 25:27-34

\*What was the importance of the birthright?

i. Headship of the family

ii. Family priesthood

iii. double portion of wealthy

iv. Designation as covenant channel (i.e. the covenant God made with Abraham would pass down through you)

Hebrews 11:20 <sup>20</sup>By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come."

(Hebrews reinterprets the events)

### Hebrews 12:15-17

<sup>15</sup> See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; <sup>16</sup> that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

-Esau marries foreign women.

Genesis 26:34-35-<sup>34</sup> When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; <sup>35</sup> and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

(Point, conflict never comes out of nowhere; there are always events that precipitate it. It is important to be able to identify and consider these events in order to successfully consider how resolution/reconciliation might be possible.)

### 2) Journey through Conflict

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, When first we practice to deceive!” –Sir Walter Scott “Marmion”

#### \*Forgiveness vs. Reconciliation

-Forgiveness is an essential part of reconciliation. But forgiveness is a one-sided affair. It only requires action on the part of the one wronged. Reconciliation requires involvement of both the perpetrator and the victim.

#### **B) Reconciliation as an Encounter:**

“We will find God present throughout the journey toward reconciliation in the depths of fear, in the hopelessness of dark nights, in the tears of reconnection. We experience dazzling insight, defining moments that show where we are going and who we are becoming in our relationships. The pathway through conflict toward reconciliation is filled with God-encounters, if we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to feel.

#### **C) Reconciliation as a Place:**

“Each of the major encounters, with self, with the enemy, and with God-is marked by a place. A place is a specific time and space where certain things come together in the journey...Here again is the extraordinary layered nature of reconciliation: It is the place we are trying to reach, the journey we take to get there, and the encounters we experience along the way. Reconciliation requires noticing and naming those things around and within us.” -Lederach 43

“Reconciliation is a journey, an encounter, and a place. God calls us to set out on this journey through conflict, marked by places where we see the face of God, the face of the enemy, and the face of our own selves.” -Lederach 43

## **2 Timothy 1:7**

For God has not given us a spirit of <sup>f</sup>timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

“Prayer, desperate prayer, seems so simple, but it’s a step rarely taken by those in family conflict.”

— [Erwin W. Lutzer, \*\*When You've Been Wronged: Moving From Bitterness to Forgiveness\*\*](#)