

Sunday, July 16, 2017
Genesis 25:19-34

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So, what's the story?

It wasn't too long ago that I talked about Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie and the TED Talk she gave in 2009 on the danger of a single story. She said, "Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories." And, I add this morning, so are our faith traditions.

Many of us have read and heard the Jacob and Esau story many times...the long-awaited, much-anticipated, answer-to-prayer twins duking it out in utero, causing their mother, Rebekah to question not only the wisdom of her prayer request but the value of her very life! The Lord's surprising response to her inquiry that she didn't merely have twins, but two nations in her womb – yikes! No wonder it was a tough pregnancy! And then, of course, the typical play on words that the Hebrews loved to use – Esau, the firstborn, meaning hairy, but also, he was called Edom, meaning "red". Edom – from which came the Edomites. And Jacob meaning "He takes by the heel" or, "He supplants". Jacob, of course, supplanting Esau's place as the first-born by manipulating the birthright away from him with a bowl of lentil stew! And, as I have learned the story, such is the humor, the nature, the very will and plan of our God. Jacob, of course, went on to be renamed Israel and was central to the rest of the biblical narrative.

But one thing that came through loudly and clearly at the MC USA convention last week was,

Beware of a single narrative on which is built an entire tradition!

And so, as I read the familiar story again this week of the birth of Jacob and Esau, I wondered, what would the narrative look like if it had been written from Esau's perspective? What if Esau's story had been dominant in the Hebrew tradition? Of course, those questions immediately move us into theoretical territory – a place from which we can only make an imaginative and educated guess. But I realized how strongly that point was made to me at the convention – it was the first thing that came to mind when I read the story this time. And of all the times I've read or heard this story, I haven't thought of it quite that way.

I'd like to share with you several examples of why this is important and how it was brought out over and over again at convention:

The very first night was the only opportunity to see Ted Swartz and Michelle Milne perform "Discovery: A Comic Lament" – a play about the Doctrine of Discovery. If you're not familiar with this term, the Doctrine of Discovery is "a philosophical and legal framework dating to the 15th century that gave Christian governments moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples." (TedandCompany web site) The Doctrine of Discovery was, in fact, what gave our Mennonite forebears the "right" to buy, settle and homestead as they arrived on the Plains as immigrants. Toward the beginning of the show the two characters, father and daughter, are reminiscing about their Mennonite family history – their narrative. The father goes on and on about their "history". The daughter asks, "His story? Whose story?" Father replies, "What? No, it's not HIS story, it's OUR story!" Although the daughter was not convinced, at one point she conceded sarcastically, "Oh... he's one of US!?"

Through this fun sort of “Who’s on first” style conversation the daughter makes the point that it’s long overdue for us peace-loving Mennonites to consider and re-consider who’s soil it *really* was into which our forebears so successfully plunged their turkey red wheat seeds. The story of the first peoples of this country is deeply intertwined with that of the first Mennonites in this country; we must learn those painful stories and acknowledge our corporate, historical culpability.

Another time the multiplicity of stories was obvious was when we began the Future Church Summit (FCS) – the time of brainstorming together about what the Mennonite Church USA might look like as we move into the future. A timeline had been constructed and displayed in the front of the room. It was titled, “A journey through history; from the roots of Anabaptist formation – and the past 100 years of the Mennonite church and the world”. An ambitious project, to be sure! There were several leaders at the front, talking us through this timeline while the remaining 600 or so of us sat around our tables of 8, listening. Before long it became clear that major strands of the story were missing. The timeline had been constructed by those who consider THEIR strand of the story to be the dominant one! That was the Anglo, European, Swiss story. The Anglo Russian thread, known as the General Conference Mennonites were missing. As was the first involvement of the Hispanic Mennonite Churches, and African-American and Asian brothers and sisters joining the Mennonites. There were other glaring omissions as well that were quickly noted and added. Sadly, the LGBTQ community still does not have a formal place of acceptance on the Mennonite timeline.

Felipe Hinojosa wrote about these omissions of people of color: “As Mennonite church leaders gather to dream and envision a new church for the twenty-first century, I hope they are aware of this (omitted) history. Not the history of white Mennonites captivated by Harold Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision*, but instead the history of Black and Brown Mennonites who – away from the careful watch of white Mennonites – have introduced their own visions. Their own stories, and their own ways of being Anabaptist and Mennonite. Does the future church have a history? Yes, it does. And acquainting ourselves with the history of tomorrow can move us beyond the tired attempts at unity as we imagine a new political and ecclesiastical future full of possibilities.” (<https://anabaptisthistorian.org/2017/07/05/does-the-future-church-have-a-history/>)

The top 3 themes that were identified that draw us to our Anabaptist/Mennonite faith were:

- 1) A strong sense of community, caring and mutual connection.
- 2) The centrality of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and,
- 3) Being a peace church; living out our faith through service and justice.

If we want to make these three claims, (and they’re great ones to make!) it is incumbent upon us to be aware of the MANY stories that create our own.

I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated attending convention; there was, generally, a positive, upbeat sense. Flawed and fickle though we are, I’m grateful to be part of this peace-with-justice-loving, Jesus-following denomination. I’m even more grateful to be part of this particular congregation. I felt proud and encouraged to hail from Lorraine Avenue as I listened to my table-mates, met up with old friends whose congregations are struggling and felt, once again, the pain of those who’ve been excluded.

We are not “without spot or wrinkle” here, and for THAT I am MOST grateful! As we strive to follow Jesus faithfully, there is always much we can improve and many ways in which we are being called to learn and grow and change. And I am grateful for the openness here at Lorraine Avenue to The Spirit’s leading in all of that. I’m eager to engage you in the Faith and Issues hour about your questions and comments as we talk together about our story, our stories, as a congregation, and how they fit with those of the broader church.

May the God of grace and of glory continue to grant us wisdom and courage.

Faith and Issues – discussion questions

(Hard copies of the FCS report) Keep a list of those who want it emailed...

(Get into groups of 3 or 4 and share – I’ll ring the chime to indicate that it’s time for the next person to share.)

Name the top one or two stories that have shaped your faith, personally. (Begin with whoever’s birthday is closest to today and then go clockwise.)

What are some of the old, long-time-ago stories that make LAMC who it is (we are)?

Tell the story and then tell what kind of “personality” or “ethos” it gave LAMC. (Begin with the person who’s been at LAMC the longest, next longest, etc.)

What are some of the newer, more recent stories that make LAMC who it is (we are)?

What are some significant stories we have yet to embrace but that we need? (begin with the person who is the hungriest)