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Wired for Relationships | Genesis 25:19-34

Good morning! My name is Melissa Schaser and I am one of the Congregational Care pastors here at Christ Presbyterian Church, and we are wrapping up this Wired series this week. Over the last five weeks we have talked about different spiritual pathways, different ways we find ourselves connecting with God. So last week we talked about creation with John and Laura, and the week before Carrie talked about service—when we extend our hands and our hearts to one another we can meet God in new ways. We've talked about intellect and worship, and this week we are wrapping up by talking about our relationships. I'm so glad that we are ending on this note because our relationships not only connect us with God, but they connect us in such deep ways with one another. As I was preparing a few weeks ago for this sermon, I was reminded that this sermon series is not just for the eldest among us or the most spiritually mature among us. My husband and I actually went over to a friend's house and they have a precocious little 3-year-old girl. She loves reading Bible stories, so when we go over there we usually end up reading a couple of Bible stories. But this last time that we visited she just looked a little bit bothered when we first came, and after a few minutes she walked up to my husband and said, "Nick, I need to tell you something. I haven't been reading my Bible." She confessed to Nick that she hadn't been reading her Bible because she, even at age three, knows that one of her best spiritual pathways to connecting with God is through reading the Bible, through learning about God, and through learning stories about Jesus and His love for her.

As we get into today, my hope is that we will be able to reflect on our relationships—the easy ones, the good ones, the ones that are simple and smooth, and then also the ones that have a little more conflict in them—and that we can reflect on the ways that God's transforming power can bring about reconciliation in our relationships. Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we pray Lord that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts would be focused on You and would be pleasing and beautiful to You. Help us to reflect on our relationships and how they can shine Your glory in this world. It is in Your name we pray. Amen.

Well, as I was thinking about our relationships, one of the beautiful things about relationships is that some of them are pretty easy for us. I think most of us can probably think of someone who you just get along with; it's easy to connect with them. I have a childhood friend from when we were tiny, and we can go months without talking, but when we reconnect we pick up just like that. It's like the time never passed. Those relationships in our lives are kind of the easy ones that we are blessed to have. God gifts us with those relationships. So as I was thinking about easy relationships in

scripture, one relationship came to mind right off the bat. It is the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. We meet them in Genesis 24, and we watch as a fairy tale love story, almost too good to be true sort of story, unfolds. In their relationship, God blesses them in incredible ways, and what we watch happen is as they turn to God and let themselves be more deeply and strongly connected to God, He makes their relationship easier and smoother and stronger. We meet them in Genesis 24...Abraham has a son named Isaac and Abraham has decided that it's time for Isaac to have a wife. So Abraham calls a servant to himself and tells the servant that he will send him to another land to find a wife for his son. It's a pretty big task! Abraham says that he has already laid this relationship at God's feet. He has already said that God will go before the servant and select the right woman for Isaac; the servant doesn't need to be worried. (If I were the servant, I would still be a little worried about choosing the wrong person!) So the servant goes on his way, and while he is walking he also prays and he says, "God, this is a huge task. Please make this easy for me. Let the woman who Isaac is meant to marry come to me when I arrive at this well and offer to get water for me and water for my camel." (Also not an easy task—he was looking for a hard-working, strong woman!) So, he is praying that God will set up this relationship. And then low and behold, before he even ends his prayer, Rebekah interrupts him. She says, "Hey, can I draw water for you and your camel?" It almost seems too perfect! It's so easy—this relationship. So he explains who he is and who Abraham and Isaac are, and Rebekah agrees to go and become the wife of Isaac. And this beautiful movie-moment happens in Genesis 24. I just love this moment. Isaac is sitting at God's feet. He has gone out into a field to pray and meditate, and this is what Genesis tells us. It says he lifted up his eyes and he saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man who is walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "It is my master." This is the perfect moment of the two coming together, and this translation says that she dismounted from her camel...the word in Hebrew is nephal...she fell off her camel when she saw him. She was so enthralled by this man who was her betrothed that they came together and had this beautiful relationship.

These are the relationships in our lives that we are gifted with. They are easy and smooth, and they not only have a powerful impact on each other—on the relationship itself—but also on our relationship with God. As I was preparing this sermon I was doing some research on the impact of our relationships on our own health and well-being. Just a few months ago Harvard put out a study that was an eighty year study, and it asked a group of guys this question: "What does it take to be fulfilled and joyful throughout your life?" And after eighty years, these are the conclusions of that study: that close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives. Those ties that protect people from life's discontents help to delay mental and physical decline and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes. Several studies even found that people's level of satisfaction with their relationships at age fifty was a better predictor of physical health than their cholesterol levels were. This is not an excuse to ignore our cholesterol levels, but this is a powerful

statement about the impact of our relationships on our own health and well-being over the course of our lives. We are gifted with easy relationships, and I almost wish I could end the sermon here because all of our relationships are so smooth and easy...

But if most of us are being honest with ourselves, relationships often entail a decent amount of conflict and turmoil, and sometimes even pain. The beautiful thing about our relationships is that even when conflict happens—when our wires get crossed—it does not mean that God isn't wanting to use His transforming power to uncross those wires to create reconciliation so that we can see His power working in new ways.

We just got to meet Rebekah and Isaac and watch this beautiful fairy tale love story begin, and I wish that I could tell you that their relationship continued on in that wonderful, easy fashion, but what happens in their relationship is that they have twin boys named Jacob and Esau, and those two boys, throughout the course of their lives, are mired in conflict. And the conflict between their sons infiltrates Isaac and Rebekah's relationship and pulls them apart in very powerful and destructive ways. There are three points at which the conflict in their relationship could have been mitigated—they could have made a different decision and the conflict would not have increased, but unfortunately it does—and those are at the birth, the birthright, and the blessing. We will get into each of these.

So at their birth: Rebekah gets pregnant with twins, and she can feel them kind of wrestling around inside of her. Being the faithful woman she is, she turned to God and asked Him basically, *what's going on, why is this happening?* And God responds to her, saying that, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided. One shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." So this prophecy is there—that there will be conflict in this relationship. Esau, the older brother, is birthed first. And then Jacob, when he comes out, is holding Esau's heel. So, Esau is birthed and then Jacob—holding Esau's heel. Jacob, Yaakov is his name; it means to supplant. Someone who supplants is someone who trips up or overthrows another person. He is grabbing Esau's heel saying *this starts here, but it is going to end down the line. I'm tripping you up in the birth here, but this is going to get worse.* But here's the thing with conflict...that really was a small moment. Jacob was symbolizing something but he wasn't actively doing something against his brother. He could have made different decisions over time...but what happens with conflict in our lives is that when it goes unmitigated and unmediated, it can grow really, really fast. For example, I have had times in my life when I'm struggling in my relationships, say with family members, and what I've found is that when I use harsh words against someone who I care about, it gets easier and easier to use those same words and to maybe make them worse...to say harsher and harsher things over time. Or with a friend—if I leave them out of an invitation to a social event or a gathering, it gets easier and easier over time for me to keep leaving them out. Conflict grows when we don't recognize it for what it is and choose to make different decisions. And those wires that start to get crossed can start to become really knotted together and harder and harder to pull apart.

I was watching a Disney movie recently—we're going through the Disney catalog—and one of the clips from one of the movies came to mind as I was thinking about the ability

for conflict to grow in our lives, and I thought we would watch a clip. [Clip from the movie Pinocchio is shown]

When we let conflict grow in our lives, it's amazing how we need to cover it up more and more. Just like Pinocchio is trying to cover up this lie that gets bigger and bigger and bigger, when we start to sin against one another, even in small ways, it can grow into something that gets messy and tangled and hard to reconcile.

Unfortunately, Jacob and Esau continued to conflict with one another and the knot got even tighter. The two places where it got especially difficult are at the birthright and the blessing. So the birthright is basically an inheritance—it's called a bekorah—and essentially we kind of have a modern day birthright when a parent passes away. They divide their estate between their children so that they each get a portion. If you remember the story of the prodigal son, the younger son takes his portion of the birthright a little early...sooner than he should. So, in the story we learn that Jacob is making some stew one day. Esau comes in from the fields and says he is famished and needs some of the stew. Jacob tells him that if he gives him his portion of the birthright, their inheritance, he will give Esau some of the stew. It was not a fair trade, but Esau goes along with it and says *sure, I will give you my portion of the birthright if you give me the stew*. Now, the only reason why I can think he was ok with giving up his birthright is that Esau knew he had a blessing that was coming only to him. A birthright is a one-time thing; when the father passes away, he gives his goods to his kids and they split it up. A blessing, a berakah, is something that passes from the father to the eldest son—to only one son—so it went from Abraham to Isaac, and it was supposed to go to Esau. This blessing holds not just a bunch of goods, a bunch of oxen and donkeys and things, this blessing holds the perpetual favor of God in that person's life, not only for themselves but for their children and their children's children.

So Isaac gets older in age and he realizes he needs to pass this on before he dies. His eyesight is also failing him, so he tells his eldest son Esau to go out one day into the fields, come back, make him a meal, and then he would pass his blessing on. Rebekah, this fairy tale wife who was so well connected with her husband, overhears this and chooses to deceive him. She takes advantage of his age and his poor eyesight and calls to Jacob. She tells him *hey Jacob, go get two goats. I'll make this meal. We will put the goat skin on your arm (Esau was a little hairier) and your father will think that you are Esau*. Isaac actually stays a little bit skeptical throughout this whole thing, but ultimately Jacob gets the blessing. Isaac hands it to his younger son, not to his older. And as we watch these wires get crossed and tangled, this is the moment when they pull tight. And really, it does not seem like that knot is ever going to come undone. This is the blessing that Isaac hands over to his younger son:

²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. ²⁹ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" [Genesis 27:28-29]

Esau didn't need an inheritance if he had this blessing following him his entire life. God was going to be the one taking care of him; he didn't need that inheritance. But when Esau comes back from the field and learns that his brother has just taken this blessing from him, he realizes that the rug has just been pulled out from underneath him and he now has nothing. He has no security, he has no insurance, he has nothing that will go on to carry him in his life after his parents pass away. And so at this point in the story, that knot has fully come together, and it leaves Rebekah and Isaac at each other's throats. It leaves Esau ready to kill his brother—he vows to kill him—and it leaves Jacob running as fast as he can to get away. And I don't know if you have noticed this, but as we have watched this conflict grow and grow, we have lost the voice of God. None of them are turning to God anymore to ask for advice about what to do, how to handle their relationships, asking God to show up and help them out, to make things smoother. Rebekah and Isaac and Jacob and Esau have lost the voice of the one who created their relationships to begin with.

These are those crossroad moments that we meet in our relationships when we can either decide yes, we're going to work this out. It is going to be hard and painful, but we will untangle these wires and we will reconnect with each other and we will reconnect with God, or, we can run as fast as we can away from those relationships. After years and years of running, Jacob eventually feels his conscience catching up to him. He recognizes that his brother is still there and has vowed to kill him, and so he does what many of us would do in those situations when guilt is plaguing us, he tries to bribe his brother. He sends messengers ahead of him to tell Esau that they will give him this big gift if he will just forgive Jacob. The messengers come back and tell Jacob that his brother didn't say anything about whether he was going to take this gift or not, but he is on his way with 400 men. So Jacob prepares for battle. He sets his family on either side of him and tries to protect them as much as he can, and then we watch Jacob face his fate at last. The conflict that had tangled finally caught up with him and he couldn't run anymore. And this is what we watch happen in Genesis 33.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” ¹⁰ Jacob said, “Please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.” [Genesis 33:4,10]

We build our faith by offering our sinfulness and brokenness to the feet of God and entrusting that God will give us grace and forgiveness that will wash our sins away. It makes a lot of sense then, that when we offer our sinfulness and brokenness to one another, when we fess up to it and own it, and it is met with grace and forgiveness, that we not only meet one another face to face, but we end up seeing the face of God. That is the hard and humble work that we are called to do. This is not about not having boundaries in our relationships—those are so important—but what we are called to as the body of Christ, is to take these tangled and messy relationships where conflict has grown, and to do the hard work of slowly untangling them. And what we watch happen, when we are willing to do that work, is that not only do we see each other face to face,

but we also start to hear the voice of God again. That pathway, that connection, allows God's voice to come in and help us smooth out those relationships.

You know, at the beginning of the story we said that Rebekah had received a prophecy about her son and how there would be two nations and one would be stronger than the other. I think most of us assume that the stronger one is Jacob. This is actually talking about Esau. It is out of Esau's strength that he forgives his brother. The powerful move was to not hold this over his brother's head, but to actually be willing to embrace him and fall upon him.

This can look like so many different things in our lives. Some of us have that relationship that has been in the back of our mind the entire time I have been talking, that one really challenging relationship, and it could mean meeting with them and owning up to your faults, and asking for their forgiveness in your life. This could also mean, even with a co-worker who you have been overly competitive with, who you have been trying to outshine, maybe getting lunch with them and trying to collaborate with them and hearing their story. This could mean with that difficult family member, who is always maybe kind of getting under people's skin, asking to meet with them and maybe even inviting them on your next family vacation—to try to include and create reconciliation and relationship. All of us have these relationships in our lives—the easy ones, the beautiful ones that are gifts to us and that help us flourish, but we also have relationships that are filled with conflicts. My prayer for us today is that we would be given the strength and the fortitude to humble ourselves...to recognize the places where we thought too much of ourselves and the places where we thought too little of ourselves, so that we can meet one another on equal ground, face to face. And perhaps when we are willing to do that, we will see the face of God. Will you please pray with me?

Heavenly Father,

God, relationships are such an abundant gift in our lives. They shape who we are and how we know You. And Lord, we know that some of them are so easy and beautiful, and some of them are such a struggle. We pray Lord, that You would bring about Your transformative power toward reconciliation, that we may straighten out and untangle those wires in our lives, not only so that we can hear each other's voice, but so that we can hear Your voice more clearly in our lives. We love You and we offer this to You. Amen.

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