

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

7/10/11

Beyond the Bargain

Genesis 25:30

It was an unusual bargain. A birthright is traded for a bowl of bean stew. The cleverness of the younger brother is pitted against the hunger of the older brother who has a profound sense of entitlement. But the truth is that these brothers have done much more than they know. This is not just another truce in a long standing family conflict. The brothers are caught in the vortex of a much larger drama. At the heart of this conflict is their relationship with the world that God is bringing into being.

It was no big deal for Esau to strike a bargain with his brother to satisfy his hunger. He lived by the certainty of a patriarchal society which decreed that he could not bargain away his birthright. As the oldest son he held a privileged and secure position. He will have a double share of the family inheritance. He will have authority over his younger brother.

Esau understands that there is no deal that his younger brother can make that will change this patriarchal system. Jacob should know that a birthright is not a liquid asset. Jacob should also know that their father Isaac would never give his blessing to such a bargain. It was common knowledge that Isaac loved Esau best and could be counted on to look out for his older son's interests.

But even without these huge advantages Esau would not be concerned about losing out to Jacob. Everyone knew that Esau was the man of action in this family. He was the hunter who could always put food on the table. Esau was the one who knew how to take control of any situation. As long as he controlled the present Esau was certain that the future belonged to him. The family would understand this, too.

Jacob was little more than a dreamer who possessed very few of the assets that would be needed to challenge his brother. His only visible asset was that his mother loved him best, but that was not a bankable asset in a patriarchal culture. Jacob did have one advantage over his brother that would eventually prove decisive. While Esau lived by the certainties of the present, Jacob lived by his hope for the future. From his position of weakness Jacob did not value the world as it was. He was ready to challenge the system that defined him as a second class citizen. Jacob looks beyond the world as it is to dream about the world that God is bringing into being.

The perspective of Jacob can be seen in a Presbyterian minister named Francis Grimke. Grimke was the son of a South Carolina slave owner and a slave named Nancy Weston. He grew up as a slave and served as a valet in the Confederate army during the Civil War. After the war he made his way north to be educated. He went to the primarily black Lincoln University and then became one of the first black students admitted to Princeton Theological Seminary. There he had a distinguished academic record. He then had a long pastorate at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church of Washington D.C.

After the notorious race riot in Springfield, Illinois in 1908 Grimke was one of the leaders who helped found the NAACP. Having lived through slavery and the emergence of "Jim Crow" racism he

never hesitated to challenge the racist nature of American society. He rejected the second class citizenship that the larger society imposed on him. As violence against African Americans intensified across the nation Grimke called on the churches to play a more active role in condemning racism. In a sermon Grimke preached in 1910 he addressed the church in these words:

the only “reason why we have white churches and colored churches, white Sunday schools and colored Sunday schools, white Endeavor Societies and colored Endeavor Societies, is because of race prejudice.” Therefore, the church “ought to repent; ... it ought to strive to bring its actual life into harmony with the great principles that it professes to ... believe in. There is need today for some John the Baptist to go all over this land, in all the white churches, among the millions of professing Christians in them, and cry aloud, ‘Repent, repent. Cease to be ruled by race prejudice Cease this anti-Christian race feeling, and let brotherly love prevail.’ ‘Let the wicked man forsake his ways, the unrighteous man his thoughts’ (Isa. 55:7) – that is what God says If race prejudice is wrong, then the church must forsake it, must give it up.”

(Mark A. Noll, *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, Spring/Summer, 2011, pages 12-13).

Like Jacob, Francis Grimke was looking beyond the world as it is to yearn for the world that God is bringing into being.

In Matthew’s parable of the sower Jesus calls the disciples to do the same. When they ask for an explanation of the parable Jesus tells them that some listeners have the capacity to understand God’s word while others do not. The seed which produces no harvest is compared to the one who “hears the word ... and does not understand it (Matthew 13:19).” Those who do not understand are like Esau. They cannot come to grips with the truth that God’s word challenges the world as it is. Those who do understand have adopted the perspective of Jacob. They are ready to invest themselves in the world that God is bringing into being. They are the ones who produce God’s harvest for a world defined by grace.