Jacob’s Children

The recent election has crowded out all other news including the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. Justice Barrett was confirmed by the Senate on 10/27 after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginzburg. During the confirmation process, Justice Barrett’s family gained national attention due mostly to its size (she and her husband have 5 biological children and 2 adopted children). Justice Barrett has the ability to raise a family while having a successful and challenging career. Justice Elena Kagan’s family life is much different. Not only is she childless, she has never married. It may be that her entire focus has been on her career. I am not making any value judgments regarding life choices, rather I am pointing out that the role of women in society has changed substantially in recent years. If you met a man 50 years ago a likely question would be “What do you do for a living?” while the first question for a woman might be “How many children do you have?” Justice Sandra Day O’Conner was the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court in 1981, almost 200 years after the Court’s creation. Note that the 3 married justices are known by their maiden names as their middle names. This is common with career women who have accomplishments that occurred prior to their marriages and they want to maintain those identities. If career women were rare 50 years ago, they we almost nonexistent during the time we are presently studying which is nearly 4000 years ago. I can only think of 2 women in the Old Testament who had what could be considered careers. Miriam and Deborah were both prophetesses who had leadership roles in the Israelite nation (Deborah was the only female judge to lead Israel). In our study of Genesis chapter 30 we see 2 women whose only identities were wives and mothers.

The preceding chapter ended with Leah giving birth to 4 sons and chapter 30 begins with Rachel pleading with Jacob to have children. She and Jacob repeated the sin of Abraham and Sarah by having a surrogate child through Rachel’s servant Bilhah. Leah then used her servant Zilpah to produce 2 more children. For Rachel and Leah, the need for children went beyond fulfilling their purpose to bear children. Jealousy and envy were present in their relationship and it is likely those had existed since their youth. While Leah was envious of Rachel’s beauty, Leah’s rights as the eldest daughter had earned her the first marriage to Jacob. Each wanted what the other had. Jacob loved Rachel more so Leah was envious of Jacob’s love. Rachel was childless and was jealous of Leah’s fertility, in fact her desire for children became such an obsession that she told Jacob she would die without them. When she finally had a son, she saw it as a sign that God had removed disgrace from her.

After the birth of 11 sons and a daughter over a 20 year period, Jacob decided it was time to return to Canaan. Laban did not want Jacob to leave, recognizing that his herds had increased through the stewardship of Jacob and that God was the source of that blessing. Ray Pritchard makes the point that God blesses the people of the world because the people of God are nearby. He writes “*If you are a believer, your marriage is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your workplace is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your school is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your family is different (and better) because you are there.*

*Let me say it this way. God wants to bless his children so much, he will even bless the deceitful people of the world through them. Jacob says, “God has been blessing you on my account.” Laban says, “That’s right. Everything has been looking up since you joined the team.”*

Laban proposed increasing Jacob’s pay but Jacob asked only to receive a portion of Laban’s sheep and goats. Despite Laban’s efforts to rig the game, Jacob was finally able to get the best of him by trusting that God would provide him sufficient livestock to go out on his own.

I’ll close with a final thought regarding how we identify ourselves. We begin our each of monthly deacons meetings with a brief devotion. Often Steve’s sermons provide material for these devotions and Sunday night we talked about the sermon he delivered about the 10 lepers who were healed by Jesus. The essence of message from Jesus to the lepers was “Walk around as though you are healed”. We have been healed and we should project that image in our interactions with others. While careers are certainly important, our main identities should be that we are born again believers.