

“THE HARD WORK OF RECONCILIATION”

Genesis 32:3 – 33:11

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A story about two brothers: the younger runs away with the inheritance and years later returns in fear and trepidation about the welcome he will receive. Instead of the frosty reception he expects, the offended party runs to welcome him home. Put this way, the story of Jacob and Esau sounds a lot like the story Jesus told which we know as “The Prodigal Son.”

Jacob the younger son doesn't run off with his father's wealth, but he has managed to cheat Esau out of his birth right for a bowl of lentils. You can read that story toward the end of chapter 25. He has also stolen, with his mother's help, the blessing of his father Isaac meant for the eldest son. That's in chapter 27 and results in Jacob's flight from Esau's wrath. He stays away for about 20 years before God tells him to return home.

Unlike the prodigal, Jacob does not spend his time in dissolute living. He marries not once but twice. Try reconciling that with what some claim to be the “biblical view” of marriage. He also manages to acquire a great deal of wealth in what his uncle Laban probably considers some shady ways.

Also unlike the elder brother in the prodigal story, Esau has reason to be angry, but instead acts like the father by running to meet Jacob (very undignified), embracing him, kissing him, and weeping (presumably for joy).

And finally unlike the prodigal, Jacob does not throw himself on the mercy of Esau and does not join the party celebrating reunion. Instead he engages in the cautious, measured and hard work of reconciliation.

Jacob, you see, doesn't seem to believe in grace. So, for all the similarities, these are not the same story. This Old Testament reunion between Jacob and Esau is not just an early version of the prodigal son. The one is a story where the focus is on struggle, the other a story about God's generosity. The one sees reconciliation as hard work, the other sees it as gift. (Unless of course, Janet sees it differently when she talks about the prodigal son next week.)

As you heard in the reading, there are three scenes in this part of Jacob's story; and the middle scene emphasizes the struggle. Jacob has made careful preparations for the reunion with Esau when he wanders off by himself only to encounter a stranger with whom he wrestles for the entire night.

We aren't told who this stranger is. In the end his name is withheld. Some scholars consider this part of the story symbolic of Jacob's ongoing struggle with Esau, but the

text clearly indicates that Jacob believes his struggle has been with the Lord. His new name, Israel, means one who strives with God.

It's a weird story, but not uncommon. Jacob has had to live by his wits. All the advantages in his society went to the first-born and Jacob lost out on that first struggle, arriving second from the womb, clutching Esau's heel. But he makes the most of his opportunities (to put it in a positive light). He takes advantage of his brother's hunger, takes advantage of his father's blindness. He maneuvers and connives until he has what "rightfully" belonged to his brother. He does the same with his uncle Laban until he owns much of what had belonged to Laban. And he hopes to smooth things over with his brother with a few bribes.

Jacob's not good at relationships. He doesn't properly respect others. If he'd had a kindergarten report card, "doesn't play well with others" would always be checked. Jacob has much to be forgiven for.

But on the ladder to success, he has reached the top. In the rat race, he has crossed the finish line. If this were a murder mystery, Jacob would be the next victim, and there would be enough suspects to make sorting out the killer a little complicated. So when God tells Jacob to go home, to return to the scene of his first crimes as it were, we are prepared for murder.

But we don't get murder. The story is full of surprises. Jacob appears to be the chosen of God and yet he is far from godly. He constantly acts for his own interests and yet his is the only prayer of any length in Genesis. He humbles himself before his older brother, acknowledging his lower position in the family hierarchy, but he doesn't actually seek forgiveness. When the reconciliation appears to be complete from Esau's side of things, Jacob chooses to not attend the party.

In the end, we'd have to say that Jacob does not become fully reconciled to Esau. But there are some lessons for us about reconciliation. In the first place, the concern for safety is central to the process of reconciliation. What surprises us is that Jacob, the offender, is the one most concerned for his own safety.

But think about it. Think about the people you have hurt. Maybe you weren't afraid of retribution, but there are many things to fear. We are afraid to admit when we are wrong. We are afraid that forgiveness will not be forthcoming. We are afraid to revisit the hurt that we've caused, to admit the seriousness of the pain we've inflicted. Clearly, Jacob fears the probability of Esau's continuing wrath, but this is not the only fear to be faced in the hard work of reconciliation.

As people mediate conflict, they know that the guarantee of safety is essential to even beginning a conversation. Even when physical safety can be assured, there remains the risk of verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, and the opening of old and new wounds. The hard work of reconciliation tries to minimize the risk while recognizing that risk will

be a part of the meeting. Jacob sends gifts and approaches Esau in stages, while Esau brings four hundred men with him.

The second thing we might take from this story is that the struggle for reconciliation is not just between the two parties, but also involves God. Human activity has done much to shape the world in which we live, but ultimately this is God's world. And it is a world in which nations are able to go to war, a world in which promises are routinely broken, and the spirit of division fuels racism, sexism, and ageism. We wonder not just why people hurt us, but why God *allows* people to hurt us.

The hard work of reconciliation involves not just prayer, but sometimes means that we struggle with God and hold on until we wrestle the blessing out of God. It's not that God is unwilling to bless our efforts, but our determination to make peace must be equal to the depth and intensity of those who do harm.

A third feature of this story that relates to the hard work of reconciliation is the example of Esau who goes more than half way in order to make peace with his brother. We see this when he runs (as the father in the prodigal son story does) to welcome Jacob home. This symbolic act is given substance in his initial refusal to receive Jacob's restitution for a wrong that Esau regards as wholly in the past. Grace is an essential feature of the ministry of reconciliation. Janet may have more to say about that next week.

Esau's generosity does bring an end to hostilities between the two brothers, but it does not establish peace, not in the Hebrew sense of the word. *Shalom* incorporates health and wholeness. It means more than co-existence. The relationship between Jacob and Esau is not fully restored. In the end Jacob promises to join Esau in a celebration, but becomes a "no-show." Sometimes even grace is not enough.

As I said, this is a weird story, though not uncommon. Most of us could tell a story where we felt God telling us to go home, or to make peace with an "enemy." Maybe it was a sibling, or a parent; maybe a former spouse or friend. Maybe it was someone we hurt, or someone who hurt us. We probably did our best to make for a safe meeting place, but knew that there was still risk involved. We also knew that someone was going to have to exercise generosity, that forgiveness would have to come from somewhere. Restitution would be a part of the bargain, but it would matter more to one party than the other. We know this story in our own lives. Sometimes we get to go to the party and celebrate a long-sought reconciliation; sometimes we settle for something less; and sometimes our efforts are in vain.

But this is not just a personal story. Jacob and Esau represent two nations: Israel and Edom. The brothers manage to avoid violence, but their failure to make "peace" will result in violence between the two nations centuries later. There can be no question that making peace between nations is the most important task of world leaders today. The hard work of reconciliation will involve questions of security and safety, offers of

restitution, and acts of generosity. The struggle for peace must carry the determination of a Jacob who holds on to God until the blessing is granted.

Peace requires not just the determination of world leaders, but the participation of the peoples of the world. Welcoming and supporting refugee families is one way churches in this country are contributing to the hard work of reconciliation: providing a safe haven for those fleeing the violence of war. Shortly we'll be hearing about the work of First Presbyterian with a Syrian family. We're pleased to honor them this year with the Westminster Peace Prize. Their work doesn't directly address the violence in Syria, but it does connect individual Americans with individual Syrians and builds trust between peoples traditionally not trusting of one another. They're building not just co-existence, but genuine *shalom*. We're also glad for their invitation to include others in this ministry of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is hard work, but it is the ministry which God has given to the church. It is the work to which God calls us. It is a ministry that tells us to go home, to seek peace with those we have offended or been offended by. It is a ministry which involves struggle, demands prayer, and expresses grace. It is the blessing we seek most from God. It is the joy that God has planned for the world. Amen.