

“The Three Stages of Forgiveness”

#2 in the *FINDING FORGIVENESS* series

Text: Genesis 33:1-11

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, August 14, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Last Sunday we began our “*FINDING FORGIVENESS*” series with an exploration of the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, the premier apostle among Jesus’ first followers, about the manner and the method for measuring forgiveness. Next Sunday, we’ll look at one of the most beloved stories about Jesus and his posture of forgiveness toward others, as it is contained in John’s gospel and its account of Jesus’ encounter with a woman caught in adultery.

Today we’re learning about forgiveness from the story of Jacob’s and Esau’s reconciliation, as we find it in Genesis 33. As we interpret this story we’ll be reminded to take a cue from Lewis Smedes’ wise words about the dynamic process of forgiveness.

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. If we were to make a list of the great and famous twins in human history, according to all categories, including literature and mythology, I’m fairly certain most of us would include the following:

- Apollo & Artemis
- Romulus & Remus
- Helen & Clytemnestra
- Elvis Presley & his twin brother Jesse Gordon (who died at birth). Now he would have been the ultimate Elvis impersonator.
- Ann Landers & Abigail Van Buren
- Chang & Eng Bunker (a.k.a. “The Siamese Twins”) who were conjoined at the side.
- Mary-Kate & Ashley Olsen
- Tia & Tamera Mowry
- The Minnesota Twins (for all you Minnesotans!)
- Markieff & Marcus Morris (for all KU fans!)

We would be remiss, however, if we omitted Jacob and Esau. For they are surely

two of the most famous twins of all time. (Now, please note that even though Esau was the older of the two, because of who Jacob is, because of what he does and because what he becomes, these twins are remembered as “Jacob and Esau” and not “Esau and Jacob.”)

From the beginning of their lives, Jacob and Esau knew tension and rivalry. Jacob’s name means “trickster,” “supplanter,” “heel-stealer,” referring to the account of how Jacob came out of his mother’s womb, clutching with a near death-grip onto Esau’s heel, wanting himself to occupy the place of honor as the first born.

The dysfunctional family that we behold in the 9 sordid chapters between the 25th and the 33rd chapters of the book of Genesis puts to shame any other family we see on television or in the movies!

Esau, the first-born and presumably heir to the leadership mantle, and position of privilege within the tribe of Isaac, is born red and hairy. Isaac is a “smooth man.”

Esau becomes a hunter, acquainted with roughness of the out-of-doors and all that goes with it, and he’s his father Isaac’s favorite of the twins. Jacob is quiet and keeps to the tents, inside, and he becomes his mother Rebekah’s favorite.

In time Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright, which pertains to the property that would have been rightfully his. He does so by the enticement of some red lentil stew. Older translations of the text refer to a bowl of “pottage,” but it should read “red lentil stew,” something that obviously stimulated Esau’s olfactory nerves and exacerbated his hunger to the point that he sold his birthright for a bowl full of Jacob’s concoction.

But the linchpin story about the rivalry between Jacob and Esau – and the biggest betrayal, perhaps the most pronounced scam in the entire Bible – is found in the 27th chapter of Genesis. The time has come for Isaac’s verbal blessing – full of mysterious power and the conveyance of unique privilege. Isaac is old, decrepit, and blind. He requests Esau to fetch some of his favorite game and prepare a meal. Then he intends to bless Esau as the inheritor of the legacy of Isaac’s father (Esau’s grandfather) Abraham.

As soon as Esau departs the stage to fetch the game and prepare the meal, Rebekah commands Jacob to kill two kid goats and prepare a delicious meal for his father, then to don some of Esau’s clothes and the skins of the slaughtered animals so he will smell

like Esau. Jacob dutifully does as his mother tells him, cooking the food, and donning the clothes and the hairy skins of the animals. Old, blind Isaac can't put his finger on it and suspects that something isn't quite kosher. But he proceeds with his blessing. "You sound like Jacob but you smell and feel like Esau. You have my blessing. And God will be with you. *'Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you.'*"¹ And from that time on Jacob has the prime position of importance and leadership to carry on the legacy and mission given first to his grandfather Abraham.

When Esau discovers that he has been supplanted once more, he swears that, after their father Isaac dies, he will kill Jacob.

Of course Jacob flees from Esau's planned wrath and the two do not see each other for 20 years.

But after a while two events combine to change Jacob. First, in a life-altering dream, he is visited by a vision of a glorious ladder going up into heaven and a voice from the beyond promising to bring him back to the land he has fled. And secondly, after marrying Leah and Rachel and laboring long for his father-in-law Laban, he determines he will go to his brother Esau and attempt to leverage his favor. Along the way he beds down near the river Jabbok and there ensues an exhausting night of wrestling with a powerful angelic presence. The presumed angel gives him a blessing and a new name, "Israel." Jacob, the one whose name could be interpreted to mean "crooked" has now been deemed by the divine as Isra-el, made straight by God.²

Then Jacob and Esau meet, a story which we heard read earlier in worship this morning.

Now, the last words Jacob had heard from Esau's lips were the pledge of an avenger. Understandably then, even though he had been blessed by a beautiful dream and had wrestled successfully with an angelic force at Jabok, Jacob still seems to fret fitfully about Esau and what he is capable of. Sometimes, more often than not, in fact, we "*project ... into the imagined feelings of others the condemnation [we] inwardly visit upon [ourselves].*"³ Worried about the avenging Esau and attempting to avert a gruesome meeting, Jacob puts out a veritable host of his family and livestock as tribute to Esau. In

this way he hopes to “find favor” with his estranged brother.

But something has happened to Esau, too. Something (or Someone!) has somehow visited Esau during the two decades of his living and roaming apart from Jacob. And though he has 400 armed men at the ready, when he sees Jacob from afar, he runs toward Jacob with forgiveness in his gaze and welcoming reconciliation in his arms.

Here we see two things about the relationship between these two twins:

- (1) “... *in and through it all, God uses Jacob for God's ultimately good purposes....If God can use Jacob, then there is hope for all of us.*”⁴
- (2) Like the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son story in Luke’s gospel, Esau’s running toward Jacob in reconciling love shows us something essential about God’s very nature. “*Esau, not Jacob, represents the radical notion at the heart of Judaism and Christianity that the justice God requires is not revenge but forgiveness.*”⁵

Jacob is so overcome with Esau’s greeting of unexpected grace that, at first, he doesn’t seem to know what to do with his intended tribute. What he had intended as leverage to gain favor now becomes a gift for the favor that Esau has initiated out of his own heart. Jacob insists that Esau receive his gift: “... *for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God....*”⁶

“... *to see your face is like seeing the face of God....*” Of course Jacob would say this. The one who is overwhelmed by Esau’s gracious greeting and generous welcome is the one who had earlier wrestled with an angelic force and had “*seen God face to face.*”⁷ Jacob now knows what the visitation of the holy looks like.

“*To see your face is like seeing the face of God.*” This is the statement of one who knows what forgiveness is all about, who has received loving largesse, Godly grace, holy healing from on high.

To arrive at such a personal posture in relation to others, Jacob and Esau have participated in what Lewis Smedes has called the basic stages of forgiveness.⁸

- (1) First there is *hurt and disgust*. The pain is so deep and unfair you can’t forget it. You wish the person who caused your suffering to suffer as well. These are natural and unavoidable emotional states of being.

- (2) Secondly there is the ever-growing, sometimes incrementally increasing movement toward *healing*. Somehow we are given what Smedes calls “*magic eyes*” by which we see the other person in a new light and rediscover the humanity of the wrongdoer. Jacob was given such vision in a dream and in the wrestling with an angel. He was a changed person after those encounters and knew that his life would not be fulfilled unless he attempted a healing reconciliation with the brother he had wronged. Esau, in his own right, changed over time as well. How and just exactly when we can only make conjectures. Perhaps he grew bored by the bitter taste of revenge in his mouth. Perhaps he felt burdened by the weight of hate he carried around in his heart. Perhaps he grew weary and worn out by the fantasy of carrying out his anger against Jacob. Frederick Buechner says, “*Of the Seven Deadly Sins anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel of the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.*”⁹ Perhaps Esau discovered that his own coming to fruition as a human being was bound up in a reconciliation with his estranged brother. Perhaps he walked and roamed and wondered long and hard and finally – by the impact of a force outside of himself and by virtue of his own internal discomfort – came to the same conclusion that Jacob had come to: reconciliation must be attempted. However he came to that notion, both Esau and Jacob moved toward healing.
- (3) Then, Smedes says, “*coming together*” occurs, as you invite the person who hurt you back into your life. This is what I call “*reconciling hospitality*.” In this stage of forgiveness we finally release from our lives the power of the wrong we have suffered and the hurt and pain the wrongdoer has done to us. We engage in wishing the wrongdoer well.

This is Esau's posture. No longer feasting on his own anger and releasing himself from his pledge of revenge, he wishes Jacob well.

This is not the progression of logic but of love. This is not the product of cunning calculation but of compassionate generosity. Alexander Pope declared *"To err is human, to forgive is divine."* But Esau and Jacob know better. To err is certainly human, but to forgive is not simply God's prerogative. To forgive is to engage in those attitudes and actions that will restore us to the image in which we were created. W. H. Auden, in his oratorio *For the Time Being*, has Herod say, *"I like committing [sins], God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged."* And for many people who live their lives in the cynically shallow end of the existential pool, that fits fine. But for Esau and Jacob, and for the rest of us who follow in their path, that just won't do. Between humanity and God, the greatest justice of God is finally to forgive. And so also for the circumstances between brother and brother (twin or not), between friend and friend, between neighbor and neighbor, between parent and child, between nation and nation: *Ultimate justice occurs when we forgive, when we act from the best within us, from the very image in which we were created by God.*

Two thoughts and a story, before we go.

First, when you read the follow-up story about Jacob and Esau, you'll notice that they part ways and separate. Theirs is a reconciliation, ultimately, by separation. As Walter Brueggemann notes so rightly, *"Reconciliations are seldom as unambiguous as we anticipate."*¹⁰ And as Smedes reminds us, *"The act of forgiving is a wonderfully simple act; but it always happens inside a storm of emotions. It is the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships."*¹¹

The second thought is this: one gets the feeling that Jacob and Esau are not quite finished with their forgiveness. And this, too, seems appropriate. Which brings us to this proverbial wisdom: *"Only God can forgive in a single breath."*¹² But that doesn't mean we are kept from forgiving others to some measurable significance with the breaths we have.

Now for the story. A tale out of the Cherokee tradition recalls how an elder was once teaching a child of the tribe. "There is," said the wise elder, "a great struggle going on

inside of me. It is a battle between two wolves. One wolf is ugly and gruesome, full of hatred, anger, envy, arrogance, vengeance, resentment, regret, and greed. The other wolf is beautiful and altogether lovely, full of grace, forgiveness, generosity, joy, peace, and love. This battle is going on inside of you, too, and inside every human being.”

The young child pondered long and hard about what the elder had said and then asked, “Which wolf will win?” To which the elder replied, “The one you feed the most.”

Moving through the stages of forgiveness, Jacob and Esau each came eventually to feed the beautiful and lovely wolf inside of them the most. And so can it be for each one of us. When we do, forgiveness and reconciliation reign, and the world moves ever closer toward the beloved community in which God desires us all to dwell. Let it be so. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Genesis 27:29.
- 2 My heartfelt thanks to Rabbi Micahel Zedek for this nuanced poetic insight
- 3 *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press), p. 730.
- 4 John Buchanan, “The reach of grace,” *The Christian Century*, August 12, 2008.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Genesis 33:10.
- 7 see *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press), p. 730.
- 8 Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984).
- 9 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 2.
- 10 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knowx Press, 1982), p. 273.
- 11 Smedes, *Forgive & Forget*, p. 2.
- 12 Lewis Smedes' phrase, quoted in Celestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), p. 75.