

The Long, Long Road to Reconciliation

Based on the Jacob & Esau Cycle – Genesis 25-32

Offered to FCUCC Gaylord by Toby Jones on Jan 27, 2019

First I want to congratulate all of you for making it through the longest set of scripture readings ever attempted in a single worship service! But Jacob and Esau's story is pretty complex, and their road to reconciliation was even longer than the four readings you just endured.

I suppose that that is the first important point of my message this morning: reconciliation can take a long, long time. Jacob and Esau's rivalry – and even enmity – started in their mother Rebekah's womb! When these twins were delivered, Esau came out first, with Jacob grabbing his heel. The name "Jacob" in Hebrew literally means "heel-grabber." These twin boys were battling from day one. What were they fighting for? Their father Isaac's blessing. Ancient Hebrew tradition called for a father to bless his eldest son before dying, passing onto his first born the bulk of his property, money, and power. So it stands to reason that as Isaac crept toward death, the intensity of the rivalry between these two brothers reached the boiling point.

As the story goes, Rebekah – Isaac's wife - favored Jacob, even though he was not the eldest, and she concocted a plan to trick her blind husband into giving his blessing to his younger son Jacob. Once this dastardly deed was done, Jacob knew he was in trouble, so he heads to a distant land, where Rebekah's brother Laban lived. It's a good thing that Jacob fled, for Esau vowed to kill his little brother if he ever saw him again. It's hard, if not impossible, to imagine these two feuding twins ever reconciling. How in the world could Esau ever come to forgive his brother?

The deep-seated rift in the relationship of these twin brothers brings to mind so many other fractured human relationships throughout time, doesn't it? I think of the Israelis and the Palestinians, Israel and its long list of Arab neighbors, the Nazis and the Jews, the US and North Korea, the Hatfields and the McCoys, the Capulets and the Montagues. And it seems that the longer such a relational fracture goes on, the less likely it is that it will ever be healed.

And yet we know that there was an eventual reconciliation in this Jacob and Esau story; we heard the ending. But are there any lessons for us in this ancient story about how they got there, about what enabled them to move beyond their conflict toward peace? I think there are.

First, it's been said that time heals all wounds, right? Well, 20 years is a long time for a human relationship to be broken, and I've got to believe that time played a significant role in bringing Esau and Jacob back together. An awful lot happened in both of their lives in the 20 years they were at odds. In the middle part of the story - which we didn't read, Jacob - the heel-grabbing shyster - was, himself, tricked by his uncle Laban. Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. The younger one - Rachel - Jacob fell in love with. He asked Laban for her hand in marriage, and Laban made a deal with Jacob, saying "if you work for me for 7 years, then I'll let you marry Rachel." Jacob agreed. But then after the seven years, Laban tried to give Jacob his older, far-less attractive daughter Leah. Laban justified his action saying, "It is our custom to marry off the oldest daughter first." (Sort of like it is the custom of the father to bless the oldest son with the inheritance and estate, right?) So Laban then said, "Marry Leah for now, then work for me another 7 years, and I'll let you marry Rachel then."

Looks like the heel-grabber got his own heel grabbed this time around, doesn't it? How does it feel, Jacob, to be tricked out of something you were promised? What's it like giving 7 years of hard work to another and not getting what you were promised? I have to believe that as this drama with Laban and his daughters unfolded, Jacob found himself thinking of his twin brother Esau and the way Jacob swindled him out of his rightful inheritance.

Meanwhile, back in Esau's world, time was working on the older brother as well. It turns out that Esau - a Jew - did something in direct violation of God's law. He married not one but two Hittite women. The Hittites were part of the Canaanites, a group that the Jews were forbidden to marry. These unsanctioned marriages of Esau's were greatly troubling to both Rebekah and Isaac. In fact, biblical historians tell us that in marrying these foreigners, Esau effectively canceled his birthright and his ability to continue the Abrahamic line he was previously a part of. His marital decisions resulted in Esau being shunned by his family and his community. It kind of makes me wonder if after 20 years of being ostracized from his family and his Jewish community, if perhaps Esau longed to be reconciled to his brother.

Time has a way of working on our fragile and often embittered hearts, and I think 20 years of life softened up the hearts of Jacob and Esau over the years, making reconciliation a little more possible.

I remember going to my 20th high school reunion and realizing how different it felt than my 5th and my 10th reunions. At those earlier reunions, we were all still posturing, still trying to impress each other with our jobs, our cars, our attractive spouses. We were still gravitating to those same cliques we'd been a part of back in high school. But by the time our 20th rolled around, we'd lost classmates to cancer, to car accidents, and to AIDS. Many of us had gone through divorces, had children die, and been to rehab for drug or alcohol addiction. The pretense and the posturing of our earlier years were gone. The cliques we'd been a part of were forgotten. We'd been humbled by time and by our own mortality. We'd all lived long enough by the 20th reunion to have had our hearts broken, our worlds rocked, and our lives turned completely upside down – in some cases more than once. Time is a huge factor when it comes to reconciliation and making peace.

One of my favorite moments in this long saga of Jacob and Esau comes in chapter 32. It's the night before the brothers will see each other for the first time in over 20 years. Fearing his older brother's reprisal, Jacob wisely divides his huge entourage or caravan into two groups to make them less vulnerable to attack by Esau and his approaching army. Then Jacob goes back across the little river they had all just crossed, and he does so all by himself. Jacob camps out, under the stars, the night before this big confrontation, all by himself. And a strange thing happened that night. The storyteller writes that Jacob wrestled with a man all night long. Jacob couldn't throw this opponent off, but neither could this unnamed wrestler vanquish Jacob. Scholars and theologians have interpreted this "wrestling match" in a variety of ways. Some say Jacob wrestled with God Himself. Others say that it was some sort of angel. Still others believe that Jacob was wrestling with himself, with his own conscience, his past, and all his heel-grabbing. Any way you slice it, it was a sleepless night for Jacob, and I can certainly understand why. He was probably replaying all the heel-grabbing he had done at his older brother's expense. He must have dreaded that pending encounter, where he'd have to face the brother he'd betrayed.

But the cool part of this mysterious wrestling partner, whoever it was, is that at culmination of the match, he gives Jacob a new name...a new name. It's important for us to realize that one's name in the Hebrew tradition is profoundly important. A name was supposed to identify you; it's supposed to highlight the essence of who you are. One's name spoke volumes about who you were in ancient Hebrew society – and even

among modern Jews today. In a very real sense Jacob *was* a heel-grabber. His very essence had been to rip people off, and his name revealed that. But on this crucial night, the eve of this dramatic and potentially violent encounter with Esau, Jacob was given a new name, a new identity. What a great moment! It's almost like Jacob was born again, baptized into a whole new life and a new way of being.

Jacob isn't acting like a heel-grabber anymore, is he? Instead, he's taking everything he has - all his riches, his family, his flocks, his herds, and his food - and bringing it all to lay at his brother's feet, the brother he had betrayed and stolen from. Jacob wanted to make peace with his long-time, bitter enemy, and to do that required sacrifice. He had to give up both his heel-grabbing ways and all the stuff that his heel-grabbing had brought him over the years. Jacob was finally willing to do the sacrificing that peacemaking always requires.

The journey toward peace and reconciliation takes a long time and a ton of sacrifice. Think of all Jacob had to do to get to this point. He had to get ripped off and taken advantage of by others. He had to work as an indentured servant for 14 years. He had to marry a woman he didn't love. And, perhaps worst of all, he had to look at himself...really look at himself. He had to endure what psychologists call "the dark night of the soul," coming to grips with his own sinfulness and selfishness.

After 20 long years, Jacob - now "Israel" - is finally ready to make peace with his long, lost brother. Jacob has a new identity, a new name, and out of that he wants to forge a new relationship with Esau. And Esau went through his own 20 years of hardship, failure, and change.

Peacemaking is a long, hard, risky road. It never happens overnight, and it requires honest introspection, profound sacrifice, and a willingness to go the extra mile, to bring everything that you have and lay it at the feet of your adversary, all without any guarantee that a lasting peace or genuine reconciliation will be achieved. But when it happens, it's a beautiful thing. When we seek forgiveness and receive it...when we try to make peace and get it, it's like seeing the face of God. Jacob says so in chapter 32 verse 10: "To see your face, Esau, now that you've received me favorably, is like seeing the face of God."

That's the power we have when we are willing to forgive, when we're willing to make peace with a long-time enemy. We become the face of God to each other. "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus said. "Blessed are the peacemakers...for they shall be called children of God." Amen.