"Seeing the Face of God"

Based on Brian D. McLaren *"We Make the Road by Walking"* Chapter 8

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Sunday, October 10, 2021

Texts: Genesis 32:22-33:11; Genesis 50: 15-21

Siblings. Many of us have them. They are a tremendous blessing sometimes, and other times, well, not so much. My brother and I fought a lot as kids, but clearly, we were nothing like the "boys of Genesis." That's my own term for Cain, Abel, Esau, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Ishmael, and Isaac. The book of Genesis is full of stories about trickery, stealing of blessing, killing a brother, revenge, arrogance, and even leaving a brother for dead and lying to your dad about it. Although there was no killing in the story of Jacob and Esau, I'm sure there was a time that Esau would have taken his brother out.

For those who don't know the story, Esau was older of the two brothers. With the help of his mother, Jacob tricked his father into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau. Jacob even impersonated his brother to pull off the stunt. Fearing for his life, Jacob was forced to run from his outraged brother. He met up with a man named Laban, who was cut from the same cloth. Both men took advantage of each other and Laban's daughters. Eventually, Jacob left there,

too. And now, we catch up to him the night before he is to see his estranged brother again. As you can imagine, Jacob is full of fear and wonders what will happen when he meets up with Esau. As Brian McLaren puts it, "Jacob felt entitled to take advantage of everyone around him, especially his disfavored brother, Esau." And now, "he would be forced to encounter the brother he had wronged in so many ways so many years before. He had lived his whole life by trickery. Now his old tricks weren't working anymore."

Take a moment and put yourself in either of these brothers' sandals. Perhaps you have been Jacob at some time in your life, or several times. You've been the trickster, the cheat, the one who hurt the other for no good reason. Maybe you got to a point where you said, "Enough", and wanted to work toward reconciliation. You were done with your old ways, "Like Jacob, we grapple with changing old habits," says McLaren, "even when those habits aren't working for us anymore. Like Jacob, we agonize through the long night, held in a headlock by despair, fearing that it's too late for us to hope for a new beginning."

Or maybe you're more like Esau, having been wronged not just once but many times. You have been hurt badly, and even though you have recovered in many ways, the idea that your own brother has done this to you makes you angry,

could treat Jacob to a taste of the disdain and contempt Jacob had repeatedly poured on him." (Long pause)

"But Esau surprised everyone," writes McLaren. I wonder if he even surprised himself. We don't know. All we do know is that Esau made it clear he was not out for revenge, and he had no ill will toward his brother. "He desired no revenge, nor did he require any gifts or appeasement. He simply wanted to be reconciled." I've worked with a lot of families over the years, and whether it's between brothers, sisters, parents and children, neighbors, even church members, the desire for reconciliation isn't often what I encounter. I have much more often encountered people taking their revenge.

As an example, many years ago, I was to officiate a wedding. Without boring you with all the details, a week before the wedding, the would-be bride was found to be having an affair. I recommended we at least postpone the wedding to allow the couple to work through their issues before marriage. But the families insisted on the wedding. The groom told both the bride and I that he completely forgave her and wanted to go ahead with the wedding. Despite my better judgment, I agreed. They were married. A few short years later, he divorced her (I have no knowledge that anything else happened between the

hurt, sad, frustrated...you know. And now you are about to meet up with him. What is going through your mind? Is it time for revenge? Do we just go our separate ways? Do you even want to consider reconciliation with that so-and-so? No one would blame you if you walked away. Few would blame you if you sought revenge. What do you do? What's the night before the meeting like for you? Our Bible doesn't tell us what Esau went through as Jacob is the focus of the story. You must imagine that for Esau this was no picnic, either. And everyone around him had advice on what he should do.

Through the night, Jacob had wrestled, presumably with God. "He received the blessing for a new name, Israel, which means 'God-wrestler.' And he received a hip injury that required him to walk with a limp, a lifelong memento of his long night of struggle. Jacob was now ready – limping – to face his brother." The Bible is more generous to Jacob that I might be, as he showers his brother with gifts. To me, that would have made things worse. Giving me a bunch of stuff really doesn't have much to do with the relationship. On the other hand, maybe it was Jacob trying to show his brother that something had changed. Esau had to wonder if this was another trick. Nevertheless, the two men met. "When Jacob finally met Esau face-to-face, Esau had his chance. Now the older twin could finally get revenge on his upstart younger twin for all Jacob's dirty tricks in the past. Esau

couple except the original wrong) and, as they say, "took her to the cleaners." That was a long time ago, but to this day, I'm suspicious when forgiveness seems to come too quickly. It seems revenge is much more a ready part of the human condition.

And yet, not in the case of Jacob and Esau. Jacob was so moved by his brother's forgiveness, that he said: "Truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such grace. The upstart trickster had finally learned to see the face of God in the face of the one he formerly tricked and despised. He discovered God's grace in the one he had always considered disgraced." The Bible doesn't tell us, but it seems Esau felt the same way about this jerk of a brother who seemed to have changed. I wonder how our world would change if we were as good at reconciliation as we are at revenge? I know that reconciliation is not always the right thing to do, nor is it possible in all circumstances, but what if our norms were different? What if the trickster changed his ways and sought forgiveness, true forgiveness, and the wronged was able to grant it? That's tough work for all and the answers aren't black and white. So many variables, so much needs to happen, but could it happen more often? I truly don't know.

Sibling rivalry didn't end with these brothers, later we learn of Joseph and his brothers and that's a remarkable story as well. In fact, I invite you to read the book of Genesis someday for it is full of many themes that have been true of the human condition throughout history. Real life, sometimes raw, stories of deceit, anger, desperation, loss, recovery, family dynamics...you name it...the book of Genesis in many ways, has seen it all! McLaren sees, however, that "these stories pulse with some of the powerful and radical themes of the Bible. Blessing, power, or favor is not given for privilege over others, but for service for the benefit of others. The weaker the brother or sister, the one who is deemed ugly or dull or disfavored or illegitimate, is always beloved by God. From Abel to Ishmael to Hager to Esau to Leah to Joseph, God keeps showing up, not in the victors who have defeated or exploited or rejected a weaker rival, but in the weaker ones who have been defeated or rejected."

We didn't go into Jesus' parables today as we stuck with Genesis, but McLaren invited us to read the parable of the Good Samaritan in this chapter. You'll find it in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 10, verses 25-37. The themes are the same. For another example, check out the parable of the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep, or a host of other Jesus' teachings. No matter where you read in Genesis or in the Gospels, in fact, throughout our Bible, God is always showing up in the ones

who've been defeated or rejected, or those who have driven themselves to those experiences through their own arrogance. God receives us when we're ready to be received, and usually that involves a dose of humility and a journey that involves suffering. It's not that God needs us to suffer, but that sometimes we just can't get there until we have learned in the school of hard knocks. I know there is an easier way, but for some reason, we often reject it thinking that we know better. Our own arrogance gets in the way of a depth of relationship with a God who loves us no matter what, but who relates best with those who understand that the ways of God and the ways of the world are often at odds. That's a whole another sermon or two or three.

The truth is, "As in Genesis, life today is full of rivalries and conflicts. We all experience wrongs, hurts, and injustices through the actions of others – and we all inflict wrongs, hurts, and injustices upon others. If we want to reflect the image of God, we will choose grace over hostility, reconciliation over revenge, and equality over rivalry. When we make that choice, we encounter God in the faces of our former rivals and enemies. And as we are humbled, surrendering to God and seeking to be reconciled with others, our faces, too, reflect the face of God. We come alive and God's image bearers indeed."

Well, said, Brian.

In the many blessed and blessing names of God. Amen.