

NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship

“Family Values: The Twins Are Finally Sort Of Getting Along”

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Bible Reading: Genesis 32: 22 – 33:11

Will you pray with me? God, when we come to you with our questions, gently open your Word to us and lead us into your wisdom. Amen.

The journey to forgiveness and reconciliation is long and winding. It is an especially difficult journey when one has been betrayed, when the pain is so deep that rooting it out, that bringing into the fresh open air, will cause as much pain as the original hurt.

Esau was betrayed by Jacob, and by his own mother, Rebekah. Isaac, his father, was deceived and betrayed by his own wife, and by his younger son. Esau, who loved his father, carries the grudge. Maybe Isaac carried a deep pain from all this, too. The story doesn't tell us how deeply Isaac was agonized. It hints that he was deeply hurt but doesn't say it explicitly.

There's an old saying that goes something like this: We only hurt the ones we love. As a general rule, when we are deeply hurt, we are deeply hurt by someone who belongs to us in some way. Spouses, children, parents, close friends, co-workers, neighbors. Sometimes, we are deeply hurt by a stranger, but that is relatively rare. Usually, when we are hurt, we are hurt by someone who belongs to us in some way, someone who has a claim on our lives, and on whose life we also have a claim.

Depth is a dimension of pain that is important in choosing to forgive. Hurts that need forgiving are deep hurts. "Deep" is not a precise measure of pain, so we cannot be exact. Pain, whether physical pain or emotional pain, is a subjective experience of the person feeling it. Depth of emotional pain lies in the hearts of people who feel the hurt. Only we know for sure when WE feel the hurt.

Betrayal with brutality is the deepest of hurts. Esau has been betrayed in a brutal way. Disloyalty is when a person I belong to treats me like a stranger. Disloyalty is when a person I belong to treats me like a stranger.

Jacob and Rebekah were not disloyal to Esau. They did not pretend they did not know him. Completely the opposite - they used everything they knew about him against him.

Betrayal is when a person I belong to treats me like an enemy. Betrayal is when a person I belong to treats me like an enemy. They used everything they knew about him against him. That's a strategy for defeating an enemy. It's certainly not a strategy for being a family!

Betrayal in a relationship involves a price, one the betrayer is willing to pay even if the cost is the relationship itself.

Esau: "Can I have some red lentil stew, brother, lest I die of starvation?"

Jacob: "Of course, brother, in exchange for your birthright?"

And then, later, at their father's bedside.

Isaac: "Your brother tricked me into thinking it was you! I've already given him your birthright!"

Esau: "Someday, I will kill him!"

And this is betrayal with brutality. Brutality is when a person I belong to treats me like an enemy and violates my security through physical, psychological, or spiritual assault. Brutality is when a person I belong to violates my security through physical, psychological, or spiritual assault.

Esau's very identity is meshed with being his father's older son, the heir to his name and property, the recipient of his father's blessing. Jacob's betrayal brutally shatters Esau's very identity. Esau has to leave home too and build a life in a foreign land.

Jacob didn't find being killed very appealing, so he fled and went to his uncle Laban's home in Haran, a neighboring area. At no time do we get the impression that Jacob was troubled about the broken relationship with his twin brother Esau. There is no hint of remorse on his part.

Until now.

Word has come to Jacob that Esau is on his way to meet him. Messages are exchanged. Anxiety levels soar. This meeting cannot be avoided. There is no place to hide. Jacob knows, knows, knows, Esau is coming to make good on his promise. Esau is coming to kill Jacob.

Jacob sets out with his entire household, traveling towards Esau, who is traveling with his entire household towards Jacob. The geography is not entirely clear, but we estimate they were about a hundred miles apart, Jacob in the northern part of the region and Esau in the southern part, moving towards each other.

When Jacob's entourage reaches the River Jabbok, a tributary of the River Jordan, he sends everyone across the river. He settles down for the night, alone, by the riverside. It wasn't raining. Yet, it would be a dark and stormy night.

At the very beginning of Genesis 32, we are told angels of the Lord appeared to be with Jacob. This is a sign that more is going on than just two brothers meeting again after years of hostility, separation, and unforgiveness. This is a sign God is at work here.

In the entire story of this family, God has always been at work. God's presence is personal and intimate. The humans in the story keep making plans that benefit them. God's promise to bless all the world through the descendants of Abraham and Sarah hovers over and around all the human plans. No matter how clever or shrewd the plans, no matter how disruptive those human plans and actions might appear to be, God insists the promise will be kept. These itty-bitty efforts of the humans to make themselves the center of universe can't stop God from keeping God's promise to bless all the world.

God has a vision. They have a scheme. Who do you think is going to prevail?

Jacob has prepared for one meeting, the one with Esau. But he has two meetings.

The first one comes at night, when he is alone by the River Jabbok. A man comes to Jacob and engages him in a wrestling match. The adversary is identified only as a "man," leaving all possibilities open. The struggle lasts all night - what a match! You can hear the grunting, the thud of a body on the dirt, the strain of muscle against muscle, but it is night and it is impossible to see who made that last move, and they are so intensely entangled. Who do you think is going to prevail?

There is a dialog between the two.

The man begins it: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." For some reason, he does not want to be seen.

Jacob: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Man: "What is your name?"

"It is Jacob."

"No more shall you be called Jacob. Your new name is Israel, for you have striven with God and have prevailed."

"Stranger, tell me your name."

"Why do you ask that?"

Then the stranger blessed him and departed, or was let go.

In this struggle, which is bigger than whatever anxiety Jacob may have about meeting his brother, God confirms that Jacob has what God needs to keep God's promise of blessing. Jacob is stronger than he used to be, strong enough to struggle with the most powerful forces in the universe, and keep standing. Maybe a limping a little, but standing nonetheless.

And with a blessing even better than the one he stole from his brother. A blessing directly from God. Jacob has prevailed.

From my own experience, I know that when you are anticipating a difficult day, it is all too often preceded by a sleepless night. Worn-out Jacob is expecting to die, or, at least, receive an outpouring of wrath at the hands of his brother Esau.

Now he shows some remorse. He has brought gifts for Esau. He bows down to Esau, a sign of submission, and not just Jacob, but also his servants and his wives Leah and Rachel, and their children. Jacob says three times, if I find favor in your eyes. They are pleading for his very life.

Esau doesn't want the gifts. Esau wants his brother back. Esau embraces Jacob and kisses him on the neck, and they weep together. Jacob accepts Esau's forgiveness. Oh, the reconciliation is not unambiguous, there's still some lingering resistance to spending too much time together, at least on Jacob's part.

But if you look carefully, you can see how the struggle with God at the riverside and the struggle with Esau over these many years, are intertwined. Both men have lived with the betrayal, one as the perpetrator, one as the victim.

They have both had to struggle with their identity, with who they are. One, Jacob, has discovered he is God's choice for blessing the world. The other, Esau, has discovered he is full of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the gift God gives us for changing the past. Until Jacob receives that gift from his brother, he cannot possibly be a blessing for the world.

We won't hear much more about Esau. He goes back to his land and lives out his life. Genesis says a little later on that when Isaac died, the twins buried him together.

We do hear about Jacob, much more about Jacob, for his twelve sons eventually became the Twelve Tribes of Ancient Israel. A significant part of the rest of Genesis tells the story of these twelve brothers.

And, so, what's the Biblical family value we should learn from this completely dysfunctional family? Simple. Forgiveness must be at the heart of any family, whether a family of blood and DNA, or a family of choice, forgiveness must be at the heart of any family, even if it is a long time coming.

Amen.

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