

Sermon: Conflict and Reconciliation

Series: Genesis

Scripture Reading: Genesis 33:1-11

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I want to thank Jasiel for his vision for this summer's sermon series on Genesis. From the glorious beginning in Creation, through the rift between God and humanity, to the enmity between two brothers and its consequence for every generation, and on to the forebearers of the nation of Israel, we have benefited from an up-close look at the foundational stories of our faith. Stories and history that may be so familiar that we don't pay much attention. Oh yes, Genesis, we learned that in Sunday School.

As I prepared for this morning's message, I was reminded that the texts we encounter every three years in our lectionary cycle are studied with great seriousness every year by our Jewish brothers and sisters. Genesis, the first book of the Torah, the teaching, carries particular significance for them, as it should for us.

I want to thank Susan Montoya, for her excellent introduction, two Sunday's ago, to today's story. Her insights about Esau and Jacob and their complicated family are very helpful as we consider the resolution of their story. Spoiler alert, we have a happy ending!

Let's remind ourselves of the context. Esau and Jacob are the long-awaited twins born to Rebecca and Isaac. When Rebecca's discomfort in pregnancy is so great that she cries out to God, she is told that the turmoil in her womb presages conflict between the two nations her sons will represent. The elder will serve the younger who is literally born grasping his brother's heel. He is called Jacob - he who supplants. Through cunning trickery, aided and abetted by Rebecca, Jacob steals both his brother's birthright, and his father's blessing as the first born. Isaac laments his error but is powerless to change it. The words of blessing are themselves powerful and irrevocable. Jacob the younger will carry the family mantle. Jacob is God's choice to shepherd the People Israel through a circuitous journey of great hardship, and ultimate blessing.

Understandably furious, Esau is ready to kill Jacob at the first opportunity. Jacob flees, and at his mother's direction, travels to the land of her family, some 400 miles to the northeast. In what was surely a dangerous, lonely journey, Jacob has time to consider his actions and their consequences. He becomes better acquainted with Yahweh, the Lord, who meets him in a dream. Jacob opens his eyes and declares:
"Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I didn't know it!"

Jacob underscores the human, divine interplay at work throughout the history of God's people. What appears at first glance to be the story of a particularly flawed set of human beings is carried by - overlaid with - the providential care of God. Marilyn Robinson, whose helpful study of Genesis has accompanied us this summer, puts it this way:

“God's covenant and God's active grace are profoundly implicated in—
braided into—plain human physicality.”

(Robinson, Marilynne. *Reading Genesis* (p. 151). (Function). Kindle Edition.)

As with the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, and now Esau and Jacob, plain human physicality encompasses human relationships in all of their complexity.

The work of Murray Bowen and Family Systems Theory comes to mind. Bowen's core insight was that human behavior can best be understood as a system of interlocking relationships rather than as a composite of individual motives and actions. In families particularly, relational patterns are reinforced and perpetuated, almost as an inheritance. Take my own family of origin where integrity and dignity are public facing virtues, often at the expense of private doubts and fears. Conflict is to be avoided and is not openly expressed. My sister and I absorbed these habits of heart and mind so successfully that we easily replicate them in our own families. This is the generational wisdom of the Family Systems framework. To the extent that we wish to free ourselves and our families from unhealthy relational patterns, we must work to become conscious of these patterns. When we do this work, we are better equipped for the challenge of developing new ways of responding.

All to say that Jacob's deceit and Rebecca's scheming don't come out of thin air. Deception is written all over this first family of faith. Remember Abraham passing his beautiful wife Sarah off as his sister, not once but twice? Isaac follows suit, doing the same thing with Rebecca. Both patriarchs hedge their bets that God will faithfully fulfill God's promise of an heir by fathering children through their wives' handmaids. The resulting jealousy complicates an already messy story line. And yet, each instance of betrayal is an opportunity for God's care and blessing: Children are born to barren women. A future is promised to a scorned servant. Nations emerge out of seemingly irreconcilable conflict.

Ironically, Jacob himself is the victim of deceit when his Uncle Laban tricks him into marrying two of his daughters instead of one. Jacob and Laban play a game of cat and mouse as they build wealth for themselves at the other's expense, which ultimately ends in a truce. “May God watch between me and thee, while we are absent one from the other.” In other words, “Let God be our judge.” (Genesis 31:49)

Which brings us to today's story. Against all odds, rather than a predictable settling of score, we have a hopeful resolution. In a few poignant verses, Esau and Jacob reconcile and embrace as brothers.

Here is the way it unfolds: Understandably wary, Jacob makes a preemptive move. He sends a servant ahead with herds of livestock as a peace offering. When the servant returns with the news that Esau approaches with 400 hundred men, Jacob turns to defense. Dividing his family and possessions into two groups, he reasons that if Esau's army destroys one group, the second would remain. It is a strategy of desperation.

But Jacob has another tool in his arsenal - it is his deepening relationship with the Lord. Jacob prays to God, confesses his fear, and remembers God's promise of protection for him and his family. Jacob falls into a deep sleep and wrestles with a man until daybreak, emerging from sleep with a curious two-fold blessing - a new name and a limp. This is the mysterious story Jasiel explored with us last Sunday. Jacob is renamed Israel - he has challenged God and has prevailed.

I would add that Jacob has challenged God and is changed. Imagine Jacob wrestling through the night with his personal demons of cunning and ambition. Tiring of the struggle, stubbornly hanging on, Jacob begins to release his self-hewn image in exchange for his true identity. Jacob begins to see himself as God sees him: A beloved child who is both gifted and flawed. This wiser, more authentic Jacob more clearly perceives the debt he owes his brother. In worldly terms, it is a debt that can never be repaid.

Take a look at your bulletin cover. This is the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens painting of this very scene - The Reconciliation of Esau and Jacob. Note that Jacob assumes a posture of great humility. Jacob bows seven times before his aggrieved older brother, and in so doing, inverts his father's blessing. If only for a moment, Jacob, the younger, is serving Esau, the elder.

Did a shift in Jacob's consciousness make all the difference? Has Esau undergone a transformation of his own? All we know is what our text tells us - Esau runs to meet Jacob, throws his arms around him and weeps. These are the tears of joy and relief. Jacob proclaims that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of God.

We may be disappointed that Jacob doesn't accept Esau's repeated expressions of hospitality. Missing is the scene of the brothers breaking bread together and sharing family stories. Instead, Esau accepts Jacob's gifts of livestock and returns home. Jacob continues on his way to the land of Canaan as he has been directed by the Lord, and from where he had fled so many years before.

Has Jacob so easily put aside a hard-won reconciliation to accommodate his own goals? Does the overarching narrative of God's plan take over? However it happens, we will need to wait for the saga of Jacob's sons to experience a truly heartbreaking estrangement, and an equally dramatic reconciliation.

In his classic work, *Generation to Generation*, Rabbi Edwin Friedman applied Family Systems Theory to congregational life. Friedman's insights have become essential tools for congregational leaders navigating the ups and downs of life together.

Building on Friedman's work, Lutheran pastor Peter Steinke, has accompanied hundreds of pastors and other congregational leaders as they navigate the winds of change in the church and culture. Steinke speaks of the power of self-differentiated leaders to calm the anxiety in an emotional system. Similar to our own work in our families of origin, leaders are better equipped to help their congregations navigate differences and embrace new possibilities when they attend to their own relational history.

Like our ancestors in the faith, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, we won't do this work perfectly. Making our own way to mature leadership, in our families, our congregation, and in the world around us is destined to fail - absent the most potent capacity of all: Our capacity to trust in the love and care of a gracious God.

When we are at the end of our rope - when we are at our wits end - when we have nowhere to turn, let's remember Jacob, who when confronting his brother and 400 hundred men, turned to God for strength, encouragement, and blessing. May it be so for each one of us. Alleluia! Amen.