

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, Genesis 33:1-16, Luke 15:11-24, Genesis 36:1-5

Sermon Resources:

Interpreter's Bible Commentary: "Genesis/Exodus"

Author Jonathan Safran Foer writes in his novel, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close": "I like to see people reunited, I like to see people run to each other, I like the kissing and the crying, I like the impatience, the stories that the mouth can't tell fast enough, the ears that aren't big enough, the eyes that can't take in all of the change, I like the hugging, the bringing together, the end of missing someone."

I do too. My favorite scenes are reconciliation scenes. The long lost loved one, friend, soldier, child returns. The surprise and anticipation of the audience. I mean, imagine this scene we heard today from Genesis in a movie: Jacob sees Esau and four hundred men, Jacob eyeing the group warily, slowly bowing, but carefully, with trepidation, and then suddenly, Esau breaks free, runs toward Jacob, embracing him, kissing him, weeping. The music would swell and the camera would race toward the reconciliation, the best part, the culmination of everything this movie has been waiting for! Honestly, I don't know why they keep remaking old Disney movies, when this is the movie they should make.

It is a wonderful moment. Like our moment of reconciliation in the story of the prodigal son, it is powerful and moving and emotional. And, like that famous story, our moment here in Genesis is not as simple as it seems. Reconciliation is never as easy or straightforward as it looks on the surface. The elements involved are not always beautiful or movie-worthy.

Now, before I get into this, it's worth me noting that the reconciliation here between Jacob and Esau is between two brothers, two twin brothers. And although

they were differently favored by their parents, and one is slightly older than the other, they are, for the most part, equals. This would be a different story if they were strangers, if one were living in privilege while the other suffered in poverty, if they came from different backgrounds. We won't get into this today, but Rachel and Leah and their maids I bet would've had some very different thoughts on these times, this reconciliation, on a lifetime of being used as pawns in their father's plans and caught between him and Jacob. As would the servants, and the Canaanite people with whom Esau lives. That kind of reckoning, reconciliation, and forgiveness, would be even more complicated than this is. But Esau and Jacob's reconciliation is between twin brothers, between equals. We're talking about reconciliation between equals.

But we know from our earlier weeks of hearing their story, that even though they are equals, there's a lot under the surface here. Esau, weeping on Jacob's neck, once wept bitterly over an elaborate deception which took a blessing from him, and estranged him from his brother. Jacob, now returning with all of his family and herds and goods, once fled his brother's murderous plans with nothing, sleeping on a stone, with only God's far off promise as comfort. They came from a family of favoritism and imbalance, of competition and deception. Jacob has taken a lot from Esau, Esau lost a lot because of Jacob. They might be able to say it's water under the bridge, now, but it's a lot of water, it's like a flood under the bridge. So, they bring all of that into their reconciliation, they carry those memories and their past and their hurts into this meeting.

I mean lest we forget, Jacob first got Esau's birthright from him in exchange for a pot of stew, which he refused to share otherwise, even though his brother was hungry. Then, he agreed to his mother's plan to deceive his father, put goat skins on his arms, served his father food he claimed to be made by Esau, and in fact, pretended to be Esau, and got the blessing reserved for the firstborn. He already

had his mother's favor, and then took what their father had to offer as well. Esau is reduced to asking the pitiful question: "Is there no blessing reserved for me?". And Jacob brought that all about. So for Esau to run to Jacob, willingly, to embrace him and weep over him, to ask about his family, and initially refuse any appeasing gifts, to offer to journey with Jacob and leave him protection, to show so much favor and be so kind to Jacob, even after all Jacob did and all Esau lost because of him, makes the reconciliation even more astonishing.

This could've gone very differently. After all Jacob did, and then to return and to return flaunting all these blessings, which Esau might have associated with the blessing stolen from him, could have been galling to Esau. Jacob doesn't apologize, and unlike the prodigal, he doesn't confess and repent, in a way that would probably satisfy us and that Esau might have wanted. When Jacob left all those years ago, Esau had plans to murder him, and he might still have had those plans in mind, he could've attacked with his four hundred men and been done with his brother and his ways forever. Instead, they embrace.

I thought it was interesting doing research for this sermon, how different commentators looked at the story. I think because I love reconciliation so much, I immediately read the favor and kindness, the embracing and weeping, as genuine. But not all of them do. Some commentators point out that even as Esau weeps, he is still standing there with 400 men, which he had already told, or threatened, if you like, Jacob with. They read the embracing as genuine but careful—an uneasy peace. They read Esau's offer to accompany Jacob and his family, to leave some of his men with them, not as kindness and protection, but as a lookout over what Jacob might be up to, a warning to Jacob that he'll need to be careful here. They read Jacob's responses as signs or wariness of his brother's intentions. So there's a way of reading this that changes their relationship if we assume defensiveness, that

is, what are Jacob and Esau to each other if we assume defensiveness between them?

In the novel, “Gilead”, the main character John Ames describes his difficult godson, Jack, like this: “He treats words as if they were actions, he doesn't listen to the meaning of words, the way other way other people do. He just decides whether they are hostile, and how hostile they are. He decides whether they threaten him or injure him, and he reacts at that level. If he reads chastisement into anything you say, it's as if you had taken a shot at him.” That’s what Jacob and Esau are if we assume defensiveness on each of their parts. They’d be assessing everything as hostile, and concluding that the other is a threat. In that way of reading the story, they would read chastisement into words and actions and behaviors. They would react accordingly. They would put up walls and stoke their anger and fear and remain wary of each other, each with their defenses up against the other.

But, of course, that’s one way of reading it. Another way of reading it is how I do, how many other commentators do, that at the end of a long saga of pain, Esau and Jacob meet, and reconcile, that they are able to live within the same country, if not the exact same place, raising their families, for a long time. That Esau really is overjoyed that this brother of his has returned, glad that the Lord has blessed him with a family, with goods and wealth. That Esau really is showing favor and truly doesn’t need to be appeased because he is so glad. That for Jacob, to see his long-stranded brother, is like seeing the face of God. That the offers of accompaniment are protection and kindness. That this is the beginning of a thawing relationship between them, the beginning of trust and healing, the beginning of reconciliation. That’s what Jacob and Esau are to each other, if we assume kindness and respect between them. You can choose how to read it.

Depending on how closely you read the bulletin, you may or may not know that this is the last week of the liturgical year, that is the last week of the church

calendar. I function on this calendar, even though the rest of the world starts a new year in January, and school starts a new year in August, but this just means there's like a bonus new year thrown in there. For people of faith, this is our new year. And new years are a time to start over, a new chance, a new opportunity, to begin something new, to let go of what was.

For us, this is new year's eve and the year is ending. And, it has been a hard year, a hard couple of years. As someone who studied history, it is hard for me to say that the world is worse than ever, I mean—the Middle Ages were pretty bad, but I think with technology and awareness and things being uncovered, we're hearing more of what goes on in the world, and a lot of it is terrible. So it has been a hard year. And the difficulties don't just show up in the world, they also show up in our personal relationships, our day to day encounters. It shows up here in our church, in our pews, in our groups. We, among ourselves, before we can go and out fix the world, we may be in need of reconciliation, we may have things in our relationships with each other that we are holding on to, that we have hurt others and they have hurt us, that complicate our connections with one another.

But it's a new year. A new chance. The time to start something new, or start over, or begin again. And in our relationships, we're gonna choose how we read the story. Is it a story of defensiveness or kindness? Of fear or favor? Of seeing hostility or seeing the face of God? We choose, in our relationships, how we'll read the story—in other people, do I see a threat, offering me a warning that I should be on the defensive about? Or, in other people, do I assume there is kindness and favor and respect between us and a chance to connect?

We can read the story of our lives with defensiveness. We can assume any embracing and reconciliation is all surface, and that there are worse intentions underneath. We can read other people's offers and actions as warnings, as threats, as indications that we ought to keep a look out and guard ourselves. We can

assume hostility in other people's behavior, we can hear chastisement in every comment. We can put up walls, and continue to stoke our bitterness and fear, we can be wary of each other, and put up defenses against each other. We can keep holding on to the ways we've hurt each other before.

We also could read the story of our lives as a chance for reconciliation. We could read them as chances for kindness, chances to see and show favor. We can read them as stories of protection and respect. We can look for chances to embrace, to weep and reconnect with each other, to carry on differently than before.

Jacob says, of Esau, that to see his face is like seeing the face of God—a God Jacob knows to be a God of good promises and blessings and protection. Jacob was not an easy person to love, but God does it anyway. Jacob is not an easy person to love, but Esau does it anyway, and in showing him favor and kindness, he is like the face of God to Jacob. That's one way to be with each other, to be in relationship with each other—instead of hostility, wariness, defensiveness, and assumptions of the worst, instead we can be like the face of God to each other, that is we can be a presence of favor and kindness and respect, instead.

Now, I'm not asking us to be naive, and certainly there is plenty of scripture to support an entirely different sermon—we're about to come into Advent, wherein Jesus says several times "be on your guard". "Be on your guard" is the theme of epistles, of prophets, too. But that's a sermon for another time. And in a hard time, in a world whose difficulties effect even our relationships right here in this room, we don't really need to be told to be on our guard anymore, we're already pretty good at assuming the worst about each other, about assuming the worst intentions in each other's behaviors, and assessing hostility in our words, and being wary and defensive around each other. We thin "She's trying to make this harder on me, he meant to be rude, they are making this difficult, she just wanted to be mean, he

always is up to something, they only want the complete opposite from me, etc.”
That skill is down pat.

But here, the story can be read another way. And, in fact, I think it's important in a difficult world, after a hard year, that we do read it another way. I told you a few weeks ago that the good news for Esau is that we know his life goes on. He loses out on the birthright and the blessing, but his father gives him an alternate blessing, and his life goes on—married, kids, clearly doing well enough to hire 400 men, secure enough to say to Jacob “I have enough”. That's some good news for us in Esau's story. His life goes on. But Jacob's life goes on, too, and it goes on from this moment. And, to be honest, even though it's been kind of a mix of good and bad for Jacob up till now, it's mostly been good, and after this, it's a lot of sadness and pain—for him and for his children and it's like that for a long time before it gets better. His life goes on, but he has much to bear in it. So, I say, if this is a true reconciliation, and not a threat, like I believe it to be, then so much the better that he didn't have to go through all that while also worrying about being on the defensive against his brother, without having to be suspicious of every action and word and movement his brother made. Jacob had a lot to bear, and so I hope that he was, at least, reconciled to his brother as he went through it.

For us, it has been a hard year, and probably things will not get easier very soon, not in the world, and not in our day to day lives. We do now, and will, in the future, have much to bear. How much better will it be, then, if one of the things we don't have to bear is being on the defensive with each other, being wary of each other, reading hostility and assuming bad intentions in every action? How much better will it be if we can let go of some, or all, of what came before, of the hurts we carry, and instead look for the favor and respect and the face of God among us? How much better will it be if we can be like the face of God to other people, to be sources of kindness where there used to be pain, for each other? How much better

will it be, when it comes to all we may have to face, if we can be reconciled to each other?

The good news is we get to choose how to read our stories, how to tell our stories. The good news is that this is a new year, and so we can start over now, we can start here, today. The good news is that pain can become healing, and estrangement can become reconciliation. Whatever we're carrying between us, in our relationships, in our time here, in hearts and spirits, whatever we're carrying about each other's intentions and words and actions and hurt, we don't have to keep going that way. This is a new year. We can start over. We can begin anew with favor and kindness to each other, we can begin with embracing and healing, we can begin to be reconciled to each other, and be like the face of God to one another.

Let's take the chance to reconcile. Let's take the opportunity with this new year, to start over. Let's work to repair our relationships, and let's work to tell our stories differently. Let's not assume the worst about each other, and let's look for the signs of favor and respect and kindness and God's presence among us. And let's work to show that favor and respect and kindness and God's presence to each other, even though we've been hurt, even though it is hard. Let's take the chance today to leave behind what needs to be left, to let go of what needs to be freed, and to embrace each other in kindness and love. As signs of God's presence here on earth, as evidence of God's kindness, as carriers of God's favor and kindness, let's be reconciled to each other. Amen.