

“IN THE BEGINNING: V - JACOB AND ESAU”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

August 14, 2011

Genesis 33:1-4

Today marks the end of the “In the Beginning” sermon series. For most of this summer, we’ve explored together some of the characters found in the very first book of the Bible - Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Jacob, and now today, Jacob and Esau. Some of them have been family stories, and today’s is too.

Families, as we all know, are interesting, to say the least. We all know that, because we’ve all been a part of one, no doubt, in many different and interesting configurations. But, being part of families, we are all well aware of the fact, that in families conflicts arise. They just do. They happen in the best of families. Yes, they even happen in those families that we think are picture perfect.

Sometimes the conflicts are little - two kids sitting in the back seat of the car picking at each other until their mother threatens to stop the car and do something about it - and sometimes the conflicts are huge - leading family members to stop speaking for years on end.

I remember way back early in my ministry, over 20 years ago, I was asked to do a funeral for a family in Wilmington that didn’t have a pastor. I agreed to do it, and sat down to meet with the family to plan the funeral. I learned all about the person who died, and wrote down the names of all the family members so I could pray for them.

The day of the funeral came, and I talked about the person who had died and the family from which he had come. I talked about the fact that he was a part of a family that included his parents and two children - he and his sister, and then at the close of the service, I prayed for the family members by name.

After the service ended, I felt like something was up. I could see people whispering together in little groups, and then, one person came up to me, and asked me why I left out their other brother. I didn’t even know there was another brother!
Come to find out that there had been a terrible argument in that family, and they were totally estranged from that other brother. So totally estranged they never even acknowledged his existence to me!

Now that’s a case of serious family dysfunction, and I’m not suggesting that

all families have conflict like that. But the fact is, that all families do go through times of conflict. And today's biblical family - that of Jacob and Esau - is going through a whopper.

Let's go back to the beginning of their story. Jacob and Esau were twin boys born to Isaac and Rebekah. I reminded you last week of the fact that the scripture records that, even in the womb, the two boys struggled. While Esau was born first, we are told that Jacob came out grabbing onto the heel of his brother. The battle had begun.

Growing up, one parent - Rebekah - favored one son Jacob, and the father - Isaac - favored Esau. I've heard that happens in some families. It didn't happen in our's - although that still doesn't keep us from kidding with Mom that she loves so and so best of all of us! But seriously, I've heard that in some families, some children are shown favor over the others by their parents.

Well, that was the case here. And Rebekah and Jacob working together did their best to get him the upper hand at every opportunity. Through deception, they wrestled away Esau's blessing, which was his, due to the fact that he'd been born first. They wrestled it away from him by deceiving Isaac.

That would be the first of many ways that Jacob cheated his brother. As I told you last week, there came a time when he knew he had gone one step too far, and he hightailed it out of town because he knew that Esau was out for his blood.

After he left town, he was gone for twenty years. A lot happened during those twenty years. Jacob married and had sons. And at some point, he had an epiphany - that he needed to make things right with his brother. God worked on him and in him, and Jacob decided now was the time.

So he prepared to meet his brother and to try to make amends, although he was under no illusion that it would work. In fact, he knew that Esau might never forgive him, and in fact, Esau might actually kill him to retaliate for all that Jacob had taken away from him.

Yet, despite the risks, Jacob went for it. He sent messengers ahead to talk to his brother, and they came back and let him know that Esau was coming toward him, not by himself, but with 400 men! Well, Jacob was scared to death. He figured that his brother was as angry as ever, and the end might well be near.

That night, before they met, Jacob laid down a troubled man. And during the night, he had what might be well described as a wrestling match with God. You know what it's like when you wrestle with someone in your sleep. Jacob's soul was troubled and he wrestled through the night. But when he awoke, he knew

he'd seen the face of God, and he rose to face whatever would happen with his brother.

What happened with his brother was utterly amazing! Jacob lifted up his eyes to look ahead and sure enough, there was Esau, with four hundred men at his side - a frightening sight. Jacob hurriedly arranged his large family and his whole entourage, in order to protect them as best he could, and then he steeled himself for the encounter! He was ready for anything!

Except for what happened. And what happened was that Esau came out from in front of those 400 men to his brother Jacob, not with weapons drawn, but with his arms opened wide - ready and eager to embrace him. And the scripture says, "he fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept."

Never in a million years did Jacob expect that kind of reception. Never in a million years did he think he deserved it. Never in a million years would he forget it. It was forgiveness, undeserved. It was acceptance, unmerited. It was grace - pure, simple, unadulterated grace.

It's the same kind of grace the father in the Gospel lesson poured upon his prodigal son. And friends, it's the same kind of grace poured on each of us in Jesus Christ. Unearned, undeserved, unmerited, but unending, nonetheless.

I don't know about you, but I think it is good for us to revisit these stories of grace regularly, because you and I still struggle with sin and conflict and estrangement from people in our lives. Sometimes we're the offenders, and sometimes we're the ones offended, but always the weight of unforgiveness and irreconciliation is a burden. And it's a burden that not only blocks us from relationship with those in our lives, it's also blocks us from a full relationship with our God.

So today I want to invite us to let Jacob and Esau's story of reconciliation move us to deal with any situations of strife and struggle we have in our own lives. Because not dealing with them takes a tremendous toll on us. Lewis Smedes once said that "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover that the prisoner was you." (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

He's right. The person you hurt the most by not forgiving, or asking for forgiveness, is you yourself. You are held captive by it. You are weighed down by it. And it comes out in anger, mean-spiritedness, depression, frustration, sadness.

Jacob came to that point where he wanted to give up being a prisoner of his own sin and fear, and he took the risk to try and build that bridge to his brother. As he did, he won half the battle - he let go of the power of that sin in his life.

It takes courage, sometimes tremendous courage to try to build the bridge of reconciliation. It takes courage because it's hard work, and because you might be rejected.

But friends, you do it, because it was done for you, first in Christ Jesus. God built the bridge to humanity in Jesus Christ. God reached out to a sinful world and said I love you so much I'm sending my Son to save you, not because you've earned it, not because you deserve it, simply because I love you. And if God can do that for us, can we do less with our own lives, can we do less than build bridges of forgiveness and reconciliation in our own lives? That's what we're called to do because we bear the name Christian.

And though it is a daunting task at times, to repair broken relationships, I remind you, that God is with us, just as He was with Jacob, as he risked building a bridge to his brother. God never left Jacob's side, and God never leaves our sides. If we step out in faith and with courage, He steps right with us.

I will never forget reading an account of a woman who was held captive in a concentration camp during World War II coming face to face after the war with one of her captors. It was at a speaking engagement she was making, and after her speech was over, and she was greeting people in line, she looked up and looked right into the eyes of her former captor.

She said immediately horrible memories flooded into her mind - a roomful of mocking men, heaps of clothing laying on the floor, the painful, frightened faces of her friends facing their deaths. That's all she could think about, and then the man began to speak.

These are her words about that moment:

"He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think that, as you say, 'He has washed my sins away!'"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal about the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile (she writes); I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again, I breathed a

silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give him your forgiveness.

As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness, any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

(Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, p. 157-158)

Jacob discovered what that woman discovered - that with God he could face his brother, and make things right. With God, what looked to be impossible, became possible.

May you and I, when we face conflicts with those in our lives, remember that. God will help make a way for healing and reconciliation, if only we will have the courage to step up, say "now is the time" and build the bridge. He will make it happen, if we only say "Yes, now is the time."

I want to close this morning with the last few lines of a sermon by the Rev. Cal Robertson, who said this:

"I know that grace in our relationships doesn't make sense. We could look at the situation with a score card and say well, she did such and such, so she doesn't deserve a break; he did such and such, so I'll respond in kind. I know that those who worked last in the vineyard do not deserve equal pay with those who worked all day. I know that we do not deserve grace from God. But consider something new and different if you are caught in a stalled relationship - a grace initiative. Do what you need to do, clear the decks, make it plain. Cut your loved ones a break and may you be reconciled as (Jacob and Esau), as Christ reconciles us with God."

(On-line, "From Revenge to Reconciliation," Rev. Cal Robertson)

May it be so.

Amen.