

A LOVE CALLED FORGIVENESS

Genesis 33: 1-11; Luke 15: 11-32

Have you ever done something that you felt really bad about? Have you ever done something you were ashamed of? Have you ever done something and hoped no one would ever find out?... I think such experiences are real for any of us who have a conscience, any of us who carry a sense of responsibility, any of us who care what people think. We all make mistakes. And sometimes, our mistakes carry consequences we can't just undo or brush under the carpet. People get hurt by us. People get disappointed in us. People get upset with us. Either we get defensive, deny their claims and build a wall around us to protect ourselves from criticism or judgement; or we face up to what we've done and the consequences whatever our intentions may have been.

But what happens then? What if the other person just wants to punish us or push us away or refuses to engage us in a way where there's some positive way forward? What if there is no space for forgiveness, but only the kind of justice that will not let go until there's payback somehow?

The parable Jesus tells in our gospel lesson is a great story, and so is the story of Jacob and Esau. Both stories highlight some terrible things that are done and terrible things that are experienced. But somehow, justice doesn't degenerate into retaliation. Somehow, justice is transformed by forgiveness. What happens to justice when it is transformed by forgiveness?

The story of Jacob and Esau is told over several chapters in the book of Genesis. Our reading this morning captures the final chapter. But the story begins much earlier with several acts of treachery and deception. The tradition of the time is that the eldest, who is Esau, inherits the family fortune and he decides how to use it and distribute it. Jacob doesn't like this tradition. By deceiving his father and tricking his brother, he manages to secure the inheritance for himself instead. But such deception and trickery have terrible consequences. His father is heart-broken when he finds out and Esau is enraged. The family breaks apart and Jacob flees his brother's wrath.

Years pass, and Jacob builds a life for himself. He never deals with what he's done. He continues to use trickery and deception to get ahead. Unfortunately, the consequences catch up to him. He forms bad relationships where there is little trust, relationships where others try to get one over you before you get one over them. And all of this comes to a fearful climax when Jacob is fleeing one bad situation only to be told he's running into

another. His brother Esau is coming to meet him after all these years. And he has 400 men with him.

What is Jacob thinking at this point? What would you think? If you had tricked and deceived your sibling out of a family inheritance in a world where justice is an eye for an eye; and if you ran away and kept your distance for years, and at some point, you heard he was coming to meet you with 400 men on horseback, what would you think? Revenge. Getting even. That's what I'd think. Isn't that what Jacob deserves? Isn't that a just consequence of years of scheming and deceiving?

Well, before we get to the shocking conclusion to this story as we heard it read this morning, let's consider the story Jesus tells as a parallel. There's a father who is a successful farmer. He has two sons who work the family business with him. One of the sons, the youngest, wants to break free. But he also wants to break free in style. He doesn't just want to wait till his father is dead to inherit his share of the family business. He wants to have it all now, paid in cash please.

Even though his father doesn't want to lose him, he respects his son's freedom to make his own choices. Even if they're bad choices, if his heart isn't in the family business, his father refuses to pressure him to stay. Not only that, he goes to the trouble of liquidating his assets into cash so that he gives his son half of all he owns. Even if he has misgivings about what his son may do, he supports him.

By taking the money and leaving, the son is saying goodbye to his family and turning his back on his father. How hurtful it all is! How ungrateful! How weak a father would just allow all this to happen!

Anyhow, the son takes the cash and leaves. The money carries him for a while. But living in luxury and excess has its price. We're told not only that he uses up all the money, but that he wastes it in useless and immoral pursuits. At the end of it all he is left penniless, abandoned and alone. And if this is not enough, he is further shamed by having to feed pigs just to eat something himself, if there's anything left! How humiliating! How awful! But is this it?...

Both the son and Jacob are in a dark pit. Have you ever been in a dark pit? Sometimes the pit is something we fall into because of a series of events beyond our control. But even when there's some of this that's part of it, the darker pits are always ones where we feel some complicity in our own situation. Could I have chosen differently, acted differently, done something differently? If only I had more will power, or made better choices, or hadn't said

this or done that... We can become swallowed up by ifs, ands and buts... Or maybe, we're stuck in a pit because we're angry at the world, or we're frustrated with specific people who are responsible for what's happened and is happening to us, or we're angry at God for not rescuing us. We're stuck... Is there a way out?

Back to Jacob. He comes up with a master plan. He will use his scheming ways to try to survive. He divides up his family and his goods into two different caravans. Esau can only attack one. Moreover, he sends the most vulnerable up ahead, hoping this will soften the will to attack. Jacob stays back and spends the night wrestling with an angel, wrestling with his conscience, wrestling with his history and the accumulated guilt of all the years of scheming. God has been gracious to him even though he has never deserved it. Will God be gracious still?

And what happens? "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Can you believe it? Rather than carry hate or a grudge or a passion for revenge, Esau embraces his brother with genuine love. Whatever Jacob had stolen from him is totally forgotten. Jacob is so shocked he says this: "truly to see your face is to see the face of God – since you have received me with such favour." In other words: you, Esau, are acting toward me as God has acted toward me all these years: with gracious, forgiving love, even though I'm the least deserving of it...

And this brings us to the prodigal son. Down in the pit of despair, hopeless and helpless, an idea comes to him: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

Well, we know how this story ends. Even while he is far off, his father recognizes him. He doesn't wait for him to come, to grovel, to plead... No! His father runs to him and regardless of anything the son has to say he embraces him and showers him with kisses. He refuses to accept anything less than full restoration for him. It doesn't matter what the father has lost or given up. His love is overflowing.

Do you want to know what repentance means? The prodigal son knows what it means. "I am not worthy." He comes face to face with his mistakes. He takes responsibility, fully. Do you want to know what God's love to you and I is all about? - the father's embrace: overflowing, unconditional, nothing held back. That's what it takes not only to rebuild a relationship, but to take it to another level. The son never knew his father's heart this way. He never got to

know it before. He wasn't interested. He was far too distracted by his materialistic and selfish concerns. Only when he hit rock bottom did he get in touch with a deeper need for relationship. And only then could he and his father build a relationship that was more like communion. The father doesn't want his son to be any less than a full son. The son must accept his father's love totally and for what it is – a pure gift. Astonishing!

If the story ended here, it would be a happy ending. But it doesn't end here, neither for Jacob and neither for the family in the parable. Jacob continues to live his life with his family and the generations that follow. There is further treachery, jealousy, backstabbing and even murder. In the parable, there is the older brother. He has no interest in celebrating his brother's return. He wants a father who is harsh and judgemental. It's because he's resentful and bitter himself.

“Listen!” he tells his father, “For all these years I have been working as a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you have killed the fatted calf for him...” Clearly, the older son doesn't know his father's heart. He assumes a relationship of superior and inferior, where he must earn a goat to share with his friends, where failures and mistakes are never to be tolerated let alone forgiven, where he must work like a slave rather than a son, under compulsion rather than from a heart-felt sense of vocation.

But here's his father's response: “Son,” he tells him, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found...” In other words, join me in embracing your brother, dear son. He is alive. He has come back. He has suffered enough. Our love can bring him back into wholeness again. You, too, are suffering, my son. But your suffering is less visible, more hidden. You have resentment and bitterness in you. You too are in a prison. But where your brother has emerged from prison, you are stuck in it. Let your heart embrace your brother in love. Let forgiving love heal you just like repentance love is healing your brother. Let us restore our family and let us build it on a healthier foundation.

Wow! What a powerful story. But its power is limited unless it moves into us here and now, heart and soul. Where do we find ourselves in these stories? In a world of sexism, racism, inequalities and injustices of many kinds, a world where there is blaming and shaming so publicly through 24/7 news and social media, it's easy for us to abstract all this from our lives by pointing fingers at others. But what about focussing on a redemptive journey of

repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation toward healing and wholeness for ourselves in relationship to others?

How can we be agents of God's healing love in a world of fractured and broken relationships? It's not about letting people off the hook of injustice. It's about finding ways to build relationships again when they have broken down because of injustice. How do we create space for grace around us, so people can talk to us and we can talk to others honestly and compassionately with kindness rather than contempt? May this community of faith serve as a space where forgiveness, healing and reconciliation is reflected after the one we follow, who reached out to his enemies from a cross... Amen.