

THE FAMILY REUNION

Today's actual lectionary text begins the story of Joseph, but I didn't want to leave Jacob and Esau without finding out what happens between the two brothers. Last week's lesson had Jacob on his way home to meet his brother. He had sent his four wives and all his children with many flocks and servants across the small river Jabbok while he stayed behind at night and wrestled with a stranger. During this wrestling match, Jacob received a new name—Israel, and a permanent limp.

When he has sent his wives across the river, he also sent a large gift to give Esau. It may have been a bit of a bribe—hoping the gift would appease his older brother's anger for all he did to him as a young man. Maybe Esau would accept him a little more easily with his large gift.

In today's text from Genesis, the story continues with the reunion of Jacob (or Israel) and Esau, but it is interconnected with the previous story. The day begins with a great deal of suspense. Has Esau accepted the gift? Would Jacob be forgiven? ...

The story begins with Jacob looking up and seeing Esau, with 400 men—quite a welcoming party. My first impression was a battle; I could see it coming. However, Jacob was still fairly sly, and he was now empowered by God. He also believed that God would keep his promises. So, Jacob went out to meet Esau cautiously. He bowed down seven times as if in submission; his eyes were towards the ground. But Esau ran to meet him. They embrace. Esau even fell upon his brother's neck and they wept together. This probably was not the greeting that Jacob expected. It reminds me of the story of the Prodigal son. This time, it is the prodigal brother. Esau was forgiving and accepted Jacob. After this, Jacob introduced his family. Then Esau tried to return the gifts, but Jacob insisted that Esau keep them. Jacob stated, "I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand, for truly to see your face, is like seeing the face of God, with such favor you have received me."

Jacob has been forgiven and welcomed with open arms. The night before he wrestled with God; he was forgiven his past deeds and was transformed to become Israel, a powerful and wise leader. These two stories go hand in hand; both involve reconciliation—reconciliation of Jacob to God and reconciliation of brother to brother. These stories are interrelated in another way. It is Esau that we expect to be the person who wants to wrestle Jacob and its God who we expect to accept Jacob with open arms. But that is not what happened. There is a little of the holy God in Esau and a little of the affronted brother in God...These stories lead into one another. First Jacob is able to reconcile with God which leads to his reconciliation with his brother. Jacob, now Israel, found favor in both God's sight and Esau's sight.

Our Epistle lesson parallels our story of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation. The lesson speaks of our reconciliation with God on account of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, we have been restored to our original relationship with God—one of love, of child to parent. Through Christ, our wrongs have been forgiven. The letter states that once we are in Christ, we are a new creation. After Jacob wrestles with God, he was transformed, he became a new creation. Through Christ, we too are new creatures and we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. We are to forgive others as God forgave us. That's quite a challenge. It is difficult to forgive those who wronged us. But that's exactly what the gospel call us to do. We are called to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to do whatever we can to cause reconciliation to occur. This probably seems foolish compared to worldly standards. But the gospel is foolish in a worldly sense. The good news is often startling and sometimes downright outrageous.

We cannot fully love God without living out that love in our lives. It is so easy to become estranged from family members. Many weddings and estate settlements will attest to this fact. I remember being part of a wedding that the animosity was so bad between a set of divorced parents that the former married couple refused to sit close to each other for the wedding. They caused the wedding to be delayed for an hour and thoroughly upset the bride and groom.

My siblings feuded and fought over the family business after my parents' deaths. It got bad—really bad. Two of my siblings won't speak to my older brother. The hurt and the anger has just festered for years. I'm the peacemaker, and I speak to all three siblings, but they don't all speak to each other. It is so sad—life is so short and filled with heartache from time to time. This heartache would be dealt with a lot better if they just had each other in their lives. But they won't let go of their anger. They won't forgive past wrongs and they refuse to reconcile. Emotional wounds can be far more devastating and longer lasting than physical wounds.

I am sure everyone here has had a family member or close friend with whom you fought. At times, the differences seemed so important. The conflict could lead to years of separation and alienation. The bickering results in anger, pettiness, and selfishness. It is easy to put God on a shelf in such situations. We can get so caught up in our own agendas, concerns, that we forget our call to the ministry of reconciliation, a ministry of love, forgiveness, and collaboration.

But our lessons today offer guidance. We are called to a ministry of reconciliation. we can have differences of opinion, but a ministry of reconciliation calls for compromise and collaboration. We need to examine our own lives and beliefs. Are they of self or are they of God? We need to listen and examine the ideas of those we are in conflict with. Are they of self or are they of God? Most of all we need to remember that in order to love God, we must also love each other.

When serving as an intern Associate Pastor in Sayville, Long Island, I got to know one of the pillars of the church well—Liz was her name. She was a loving, committed and giving person. Liz was also very stubborn and determined at times. Often her political and theological views different from those of the head of staff. She tended to be very vocal about the difference. Even though these differences were known to all, she and Trevor Hauske, our head of staff, had a wonderful relationship. One day, we found out that Liz had cancer. It was terminal. There was nothing that the doctors could do. During one of Trevor's visits to the hospital with Liz she told him, "You know, I may not have always seen eye to eye with you, but I will always walk arm in arm with you." Friends, that is the church! That is the ministry of reconciliation; to be able to love and care about someone but also to disagree with them.

Is there someone in your own life that you harbor ill feelings towards? Is there someone whose favor you need to seek out? Is there a brother or sister, a son or daughter, a mother or father that you have affronted? If so, find that person and do not confront them but ask for their forgiveness. In God's Kingdom, there is no room for hidden anger and bad feelings. Those who follow Christ are called to love and reconciliation.

In a few moments, we will be celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Lord's Table is one of love, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Come, taste, and see that the Lord is good and that he desires us to love one another. AMEN.