



Forgiveness: A Story of Esau

TEXT
Genesis 33:1–12

July 14, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick

We see it again and again in those first few pages of the Bible: The story of brothers in conflict. Cain kills Abel. Isaac lives estranged from his half brother Ishmael. And now we come to their descendants, Esau and Jacob. Everything that has led up to this moment — as these brothers, bitterly alienated from one another, finally come face to face — points to only one possible outcome: the earth stained red as Esau settles the score with a brother who, 20 years earlier, had stolen his future from him. It's in their blood: this estrangement, this sometimes deadly sibling rivalry.

To recount all the animosity between these brothers would be impossible. But if we even take a quick look at lowest points of their relationship, we just might come to understand, and maybe even try to imitate, the depths of Esau's ability to forgive what many would consider unforgivable. Even in the womb, the twins Jacob and Esau "struggled" with one another, and things only got worse from there. Esau was born just moments before his brother, and in that day, this meant that Esau, the firstborn son, had a

privileged position in the family. He was to receive a double share of his father's inheritance and his father's blessing, everything he would need, and then some, to live a good life with land and children aplenty.

Parents if you want to make your youngest sweat a little bit, just start saying stuff like, "You know, this whole favoring of the firstborn makes a lot of sense to me ... and it's biblical."

It was good to be the firstborn. But Jacob, well, Jacob would be second to no one. So, he tricked Esau into selling his birthright and then tricked his father into giving him Esau's blessing. I'll give it to Jacob, he's slick. With just two simple moves, he stole Esau's privileged future for himself. Then, knowing his brother was quite talented with the sword and bow, Jacob fled the scene of the crime and put as much distance as he could, as fast as he could, between him and certain death. Time passed. Jacob halfheartedly sought forgiveness, and Esau swore that when the moment was right, he would kill his brother.

The good news for many of you today will be that there is a sibling relationship in worse shape than yours. Remember that as the story continues to unfold.

Twenty years had passed since Jacob slipped away, but one day he strayed too close to Esau's new home. They were aware of each other's presence, and Jacob knew that was not a good thing. When it becomes apparent that he can no longer avoid him, Jacob sends out his servants with a message for Esau letting him know that Jacob is a man of means. He has not squandered his brother's inheritance or blessing, and indeed, built upon them. He's got plenty of animals and servants, and the wealth that would accompany such stature, and he's using them to try and convince Esau not to keep those Cain-and-Abel-type family traditions going.

But Jacob's messengers return with an ominous report: "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you ... and four hundred men are with him." One translation says that at this news Jacob was "greatly afraid and distressed." Yeah, I'll bet he was. His brother had 20 years to stew on his treachery *and* to get better with the bow and sword. The prophet Hosea describes people who sow the wind only to reap the whirlwind, and I'd bet that at this moment, Jacob could feel the air around him starting to whip up.

So, he does what a lot of us do when we realize that there's a storm coming: he prays. In a prayer for deliverance from the hand of his brother, Jacob repeatedly, and not-so-subtly, reminds God that he is God's chosen one, and that he has a nation of people to build up — which is going to be incredibly difficult to do if he's dead. And then after he prays to God, he tries to bribe Esau with not one, not two, but three herds of animals. With “no hint of remorse” for the life he stole from his brother, Jacob methodically looks for an escape from the impending tempest that will soon be upon him.¹

By the time we get to the passage Joyce read for us, Jacob has done his best to strategize, pray and bribe his way out of his brother's wrath, but when he looks up and sees Esau and 400 of his closest friends moving in on him and his family, he plays it careful and divides them into two groups. That way *if* Esau attacks, *when* Esau attacks, at least half of them might stand a chance. In one last-ditch effort, Jacob slowly approaches his brother, stopping to bow seven times along the way, an act of complete submission to his brother.

Until this point, the story between Jacob and Esau has meticulously developed its characters over chapters: the places they've visited, their inner thoughts and desires, the people they've encountered, and even the numbers of animals in their herds. But then, the story suddenly sprints ahead, as Esau races to meet his brother, embrace him and kiss him — all too quickly for any

kind of detail. There are no words exchanged or inner thoughts revealed, no earnest apologies or stirring pardons. After deception and rage separated them for twenty years, there is only weeping, and I'm not talking about “dude sniffles,” where we try to pass it off as allergies. I mean full-body convulsion, dehydration through the eyes, ugly cry weeping.

Then Esau meets his nephews and nieces. Jacob offers Esau a gift; Esau protests; Jacob insists; Esau relents. It's basically the Ancient Near Eastern version of arguing over who's going to get the check.

So, after an *extraordinary* embrace, we get the most *ordinary* interactions. A story that should have ended with retribution and alienation ends instead with forgiveness and reconciliation. And this family, estranged for decades, acts as if it's just another family dinner.

Pastors get asked a lot of theological questions in weird places, which is why, when the person in the seat next to me for the next three hours asks what I do, I'm usually a farmer, an Uber driver, anything but a person with a theological degree. But one good question people ask me is if I have ever seen an undeniable, clear-cut miracle. When I answer yes, I can see their eyes light up, as they're expecting to hear tales of the blind regaining sight, the dead being raised and water being turned into wine. (I think that last one is the one most of them hope for.)

What they get instead are stories about people long blind

to the suffering of their neighbors who have suddenly had their vision restored and their hearts changed — stories about those who wish they were dead finding healthy and authentic love for themselves and this world. Those are the miracles I see, and after knowing Jacob and Esau's story — one of decades of hurt and deadly rage — I count their embrace as another miracle. Now as far as water turning into wine, I see it almost daily. When we pour our kids not juice or milk but water, well, water turns into whines.

Now that I've got these two boys, it's my hope that their relationship will look a lot more like the back end of Jacob and Esau's story than the beginning. And while there are days I'm afraid they're veering into Cain and Abel territory, I more often see the seeds of my hope starting to shoot up. It is my hope that they, and truly all of us, can copy Esau's ability to forgive; to forego the chance to destroy another and instead destroy what would otherwise become a perpetual cycle of hurt and retribution.

If I'm honest, I worry a lot that as a species, we have become too comfortable with this kind of hurt and its aftermath. Surveys show that we are an increasingly angry, hurt and isolated people.² And while I don't think anyone wants those feelings of pain, shock, disappointment, sadness, anger and bitterness, it seems that we have made our peace with betrayal and estrangement. They're becoming our “new normal,” while forgiveness and reconciliation have

become unthinkable to most. I'd imagine Esau and Jacob were in a very similar place.

But here's the thing we learn about forgiveness from this story: It doesn't care what we're comfortable with or used to. It breaks into their story, and it causes a man with the means and motivation to take the life of his brother to embrace him instead. And it breaks into our stories and makes us question if the familiar cycle of hurt, anger and vengeance really needs to repeat itself; if the inevitable feelings that come with them are really so inevitable after all. Forgiveness breaks into their lives, it breaks into our lives, because our God, its author, also breaks into the world in this way. It can be anything: the embrace of estranged brothers; the cry of an infant in a manger; or the softening of a hardened heart in Overland Park, Kansas. But God breaks in, and with him, forgiveness too.

I had a chance this week to talk to a Cuban man whose family, decades ago, had suffered under the regime there. When he was 3 years old, his father was arrested as a political dissident, and his mother, at different times, was taken in too. His father spent four years in a Cuban prison. I was in Cuba a couple of years ago, and I can assure you of one thing: You do not want to spend one second in a Cuban prison, much less four long years. I simply cannot imagine what they went through.

They finally made their way to the American consulate and eventually to these shores as political refugees. So we got to

talk about the Cuban people and the Cuban government, and the manifold differences between the two. There was a lot of laughter, but he said to me, as a smile left his face, "I used to be so angry at everyone and all of it. It still makes me sad to think about everything. But I found Christ, and I've been able to forgive." Like Esau, his family suffered greatly — they too lost their future — but like him, forgiveness has erupted in this man's life. It entered as Christ entered. So, yet again, I don't know how it's possible, but I have seen the miraculous.

And Jacob has seen it too. After their embrace, he says to his Esau, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." And for Jacob, this is not a metaphor. He has been face-to-face with God and lived to tell the tale. You see, Jacob thought it was a good idea to wrestle with God — not metaphorically, but literally, to lock up and grapple with God. You'd think hand-to-hand combat with the being who actually made your hands would be a bad idea, but their struggle ends with Jacob only wounded, and having received God's blessing. So Jacob has already seen the face of a God who gives him grace instead of wrath. Now embracing his brother, he sees that same face staring back at him as he receives forgiveness instead of payback — both miracles; both gifts; both resulting in peace.

So, friends, where are you in this story? Are you the one hurt or the one who has done the hurting? Maybe you're both. Maybe at this point in your life, you

feel like one of the characters in the background, just watching, waiting to see what will happen in others' lives. But you're somewhere in there. So where?

We're all going to join our voices here in a few moments and ask God to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Now I'm sure we'll all pray that first part with sincerity. I think everyone of us yearns for forgiveness — from God and from those we hurt. We need it to move forward with our lives. I hope that anyone here who has hurt someone else deeply hears this: Forgiveness is possible. It will not be easy, but *it is possible*. If, how and when that will happen, I don't know. Esau's story tells me that forgiveness doesn't follow rules. It simply breaks in — sometimes in the least hopeful situations. So don't give up on forgiveness because I can promise you the God from whom it issues hasn't given up on you.

But that second part of the Lord's Prayer, the one about needing to forgive our debtors, well, that one we get a little less enthusiastic about. We are often much more eager to receive than to give. I know that for some, it's because you've been hurt in a way that is even greater than Jacob's theft of Esau's future. Too many have endured the unimaginable at the hands of another, and you just can't mean it; you can't even pretend that you're going to forgive that debt. That's OK. This prayer is still for you, maybe *especially* for you, because we will keep saying it. Every week.

So, if the moment comes that you can forgive that debt, you'll have a chance to fully and honestly offer it to God. And if not, then this prayer will serve as a reminder for us all that are here to help carry one another's burdens, that we rejoice together, and we sorrow together. So if despite your efforts, the hurt remains to forgive, be gracious with yourselves, and let us do the same.

But, if we are honest, many of us don't have a good reason to withhold forgiveness. We don't really pray for those who have harmed us because we really don't want forgiveness to break into our worlds. It's too disruptive and demanding. So, we fool ourselves into believing in writer Anne Lamott's words that we can be Christians who aren't "heavily into forgiveness." The truth of the matter, though, is that there is no other kind of Christian than the one who *is* "heavily into forgiveness." "Forgiveness," she writes, "is the hardest work we do. When, against all odds, over time, your heart softens towards truly heinous behavior ... you almost have to believe that something not of this earth snuck into your stone-cold heart."³

Forgiveness is sneaky; and to be a Christian is to let it surprise us. Though born centuries before the first Christian showed up, Esau knew that was the only way to be as well. He breaks the cycle, as forgiveness breaks into his heart; and in doing so, he challenges us to dig deep to find forgiveness. The question remains for us: Will we? It is undeniably hard work, maybe some of the hardest work we can

do. But just when you think that possibility has passed, remember these two brothers. Remember that until the moment it happened, it seemed impossible. Remember that it changed not only the lives of those two, but of their families, as well. Remember that the miraculous occurs — not only occurs on the page, but all around us. And friends, if that possibility is worth striving towards, then let us take our lead from Esau, race towards it and embrace it with all our strength.

Now to the one who breaks into our lives and breaks up cycles of hurt and hurting, to that one be glory forever and ever. Amen.

¹Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, pp. 262–263

²<https://news.gallup.com/poll/249098/americans-stress-worry-anger-intensified-2018.aspx>

³Anne Lamott, *Small Victories*, p. 105

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The sermon can be read online at <https://www.villagepres.org/people/like-us.html>.