

Forgiveness as Hospitality
Genesis 32:3-11, 33:1-4
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 15, 2019
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Twins were born. They were born later in their parents' lives. In fact, not only had their mom and dad married when he was forty, but they had been married for twenty years and all evidence showed that they would not have children.

But then it happened. They conceived and there was not one, but two children, to join their family. Two children, who even before they were born, wrestled with each other in such a way that their mother could sense the tension between them.

And that seemed to be the way of their lives. These twins grew up to be very different from one another. And while their parents loved both children, each had a special connection with one. And so between the differences, the competition, the parental preference (sometimes intentional, sometimes not), it should have been no surprise that the relationship found its climax in a great conflict...a conflict filled with deception and desperation, a conflict so bad that it led to the twins parting ways, one finding a new home in a new land, both marrying and having children without the other around. No birth announcements or family holidays were shared between these brothers. Sisters-in-law did not know each other. Cousins did not grow up playing together. And, surely, in spite of their own role in the conflict between brothers, their parents mourned.

But then a day came, filled with anxiety and anticipation, a day when they would come face-to-face again. A day that seemingly could have gone either way – a day of battle or a day of forgiveness.

This is the story of Jacob and Esau.

Before the verses that we read this morning, Genesis tells us of their conflicted history. It tells us of the deception between them. It tells us of their separation, of a family broken because of their conflict.

And it tells us more. It tells us that once Jacob, who had taken his brother's blessing and birthright, once he left the family home, he too was deceived. Although he ended up building his own family...although he ended up marrying the woman he loved...still those things came about amidst even more deception, amidst his own father-in-law taking advantage of him.

And all of that action culminates in our reading today. Jacob had taken his wives and children, all of his animals and servants, and left the land of his father-in-law. "After having spent twenty years in Laban's home, Jacob is commanded by God to return to the land of his ancestors, the land of Canaan. In order to do so, Jacob has to pass through Edom, the territory of his brother, Esau."¹

And so, the moment has come. What will happen? Should he prepare for battle? Should he seek forgiveness? Would it even be offered? And why would it? After all, the last time they had seen each other, Esau, with good reason, had threatened Jacob's life.

Those are the questions that are clearly on his heart and mind as he prepares to meet his brother again. We see it in this passage as he separates his family and possessions, doing so in case Esau wants to wage war, so that while he might lose some, he wouldn't lose all. We see his fear as he prepares gifts to offer his brother, peace offerings we would call them, or in our more cynical moments we might just think he's trying to buy his Esau's favor.

If we are paying attention to this story and really entering in, then we can imagine the tension that was alive in this meeting. In fact, the hard reality is that many of us know what it is

¹ Rabbi Loraine Heller, <https://reformjudaism.org/meeting-jacob-and-esau-healing-open-wound>

to have broken relationships, to have hurt someone or been hurt by someone with whom we were once or should be close.

We know what it is to have those moments when a shared history causes us to see again someone with whom our relationship is broken...an ex-spouse at a child's graduation...a sibling to whom we haven't spoken at a parent's death bed...a friend, once our closest confidant, at a class reunion.

We know what it is to worry, to hope, to consider not showing up, but to know that we have to. And, it is not unlikely that we know what it is for that occasion to go worse than we imagined even as we hope it might go better.

For Jacob and Esau, in today's story, it went well. Genesis 33 opens with these words, "Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. *But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.*"²

While there are people, even scholars, who have questioned the sincerity of this moment, who have asked if this was really long lasting forgiveness, if this was a true reconciliation, if Esau really felt love and forgiveness for his brother...the reality is that sometimes we need to take a story at face value. As Rabbi Loraine Heller points out, "In Judaism, we usually put more emphasis on actions than on intentions, on the acts we perform rather than on the emotions we feel. Looked at in this way, Esau's kiss can simply be taken at face value as a sign of reconciliation."³ And what a beautiful gift in this story when brothers forgive one another.

² Genesis 33:1-4, NRSV.

³ Heller, <https://reformjudaism.org/meeting-jacob-and-esau-healing-open-wound>

So, how do *we* get to forgiveness? How do *we* move toward reconciliation? We have certainly talked about this before and we will certainly talk about it again. Because forgiveness is difficult.

So, we can talk through the same things that we usually do. We can remind ourselves that forgiveness is important, if for no other reason than that it sets us free from the hurts we have endured. Perhaps you've heard the saying that not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Forgiveness is important for our health, for the fullness of life. It doesn't require the other person to seek it or want it or even know about it. It doesn't require the other person to be present or even to be alive. And yet, it is still difficult.

And we can talk about the relationship between forgiving and forgetting. We can talk about how sometimes not only do we not forget, but sometimes we should not forget the hurt that has been inflicted. It has been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. Claiming that forgiveness is only real if we forget the hurt can be like inviting the insanity of opening ourselves again and again to same hurt only to have empty words of forgiveness offered each time.

And we can talk about the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. In today's story Jacob and Esau are seemingly reconciled. And yet that doesn't mean they both go back home and live on the family farm. It doesn't mean they start spending every holiday together. And, in the Biblical story, it certainly doesn't mean that their descendants are lifelong allies. In fact, if you keep reading the story, you will see that Esau and Jacob decide, for very practical reasons, that they need to live in different places. Forgiveness is offered and received, and then they go their separate ways.

We can and we will keep talking about the realities around forgiveness. We can and we will keep talking about the challenges of forgiveness.

But there is one other thing it seems worth noting. And that is something I don't hear us talking much about...it is the relationship between forgiveness and hospitality. We often talk about hospitality in those ways where we are in control of who is included and when we offer it. That is the hospitality of inviting friends to dinner or welcoming someone into the church. We sometimes even talk about hospitality toward the stranger, about the ways we prepare our hearts and lives to welcome the unexpected people at unexpected times.

But when we think of forgiveness as an act of hospitality, then hospitality becomes about creating space for a change of heart...creating space for a change of relationship...creating space for "the healing of an open wound."⁴

So, how do we do that?

Again...it is not easy. But we commit to make little steps each day.

Perhaps it begins with something we do each time we worship together...praying the Lord's Prayer. We have talked before about how this prayer (and others) are not meant to be prayed as if they are wish lists sent to Santa, but rather as if they are our commitment to how we will live. And perhaps this is no clearer than in the words about forgiveness that we say in the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." In this prayer the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we offer are bound together. And when we live with that reality, it just might help to create space within us to be more gentle with others and with ourselves when we need forgiveness.

⁴ Heller, <https://reformjudaism.org/meeting-jacob-and-esau-healing-open-wound>

And if we are willing to let true hospitality take root within us, if we are willing to let the core of our being be shaped by the grace of God, then it is ever more likely that we are able to create space for forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't easy, but it is the work to which we are called. And if we open our hearts, it is the work toward which we can move, the act for which we can allow ourselves to be readied, if only we are willing.

Ultimately hospitality is about creating space for others. And isn't that largely what forgiveness is as well?

May we continue to be rooted in the welcome and grace of God in such ways that we can extend grace, even to those who have hurt us. Amen.