

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: 2020 Year A. Week 4 of 4 on stewardship using resources from *Sanctified Art*.

Theme is "Restore"

Text: Genesis 33:1-17 (Primary text) Esau forgives Jacob, John 21:1-19 Jesus appears to the disciples.

Title: Grace for Broken People

Focus: The Bible is full of real stories of broken people who by grace experience restoration/reconciliation that heals that brokenness.

Scripture text: Genesis 33:1-17 Esau forgives Jacob

¹Now 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. ²He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.' ⁶Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favor with my lord.' ⁹But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' ¹⁰Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. ¹¹Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it.

¹² Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.' ¹³But Jacob said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.'

¹⁵ So Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'Why should my lord be so kind to me?' ¹⁶So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷But Jacob journeyed to Succoth,^{*} and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

Who is *in* the Bible? Who is it about?

Last week, we talked about imagination. We talked about reimagining a particular scripture or reimagining the way we see ourselves and what we're calling "our money story," which has to do with how we're impacted by money and think about money in light of God's own money story.

Today I want us to engage our imagination in a different way. I want to think about how we view scripture. Would you "wonder" with me? *Slowly here to allow them time to wonder. . .*

Sometimes I wonder what people think the Bible must contain or what it's about. Or maybe, not *what* it's about, but *who* it's about. I wonder what people think about *who* the Bible is about or whose story is in there.

People must have some perception of *what's* in there or *who's* in there. And I wonder if maybe that perception isn't really reflective of what and who are actually in the Bible. And if that perception is skewed or off-base, then maybe that would create a barrier or a disincentive for a person to get in there and really find out for oneself. Maybe a skewed perception would prevent a person from reading about and identifying personally with the story. Maybe an off-base assumption would prevent a person from finding out for him or herself and having that "Aha!" moment in which you see yourself in the story.

For instance, I wonder if people think that the Bible is about . . .

- Bold and brave people who were always confident about what God wanted them to do? Like comic book superheroes or good guys in cowboy westerns, ready to save the day?
 - I think some of this is accurate in that we could point to stories in which people exhibited courage.
 - And this is partly true in that there were people who overcame long odds.
 - But this perception would seem to me to be a caricature or exaggeration, too: I don't know that there is an always "onward and upward" story trajectory of a hero profile.

I wonder what people think: Are people in the Bible the ones who metaphorically go to the best schools, get the best grades, always have a career plan, and do what's expected of them?

- Maybe, but I'm not sure who that would be in the Bible.

There is this part in book of Philippians in which the Apostle Paul sort of presents his personal report card or resume and describes what a standout he has been. Paul writes,

⁴I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a

persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

And yet he also places this into perspective. In the end, he doesn't place his trust in these things as earning him a special status but says what's most important is knowing Jesus. Compared to that, these things are like "rubbish."

So, what kind of stories are in the Bible? What kind of people are in there? Who is it about?

I don't think it's about perfect people. It's about ordinary, flawed people. If people accomplish (if *accomplish* is the right word) –if people accomplish significant things, it's really because they are ordinary people being used in extraordinary ways by God rather than those people being so remarkable in and of themselves.

The Bible is about flawed and broken people. Let's think about just a few:

In the reading from Exodus 3 weeks ago or from Leviticus last week, we've read about **Moses**. On the one hand, he was a leader who confronted Pharaoh in Egypt and led the people out of slavery in Egypt. That sounds like heroic stuff. On the other, he was so aware of his faults and shortcomings—he himself said he didn't know how to speak: "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Ex. 4:10). He doubted himself, he was prone to fits of anger. . .

There's **David**, who was King David, but who didn't fit the expectations of a king. God sent the prophet Samuel to Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the future king. When Samuel asked Jesse if all of his sons were there, Jesse, "Jesse said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep" (1 Samuel 16). That makes him sound like an afterthought to his own father.

David's deepest flaws were revealed in his abuse of Bathsheba and Uriah.

There are outsiders like **Ruth** who play significant roles in the biblical story, but as underdogs or outsiders, they don't fit the typical heroic storyline.

Today's first reading from Genesis is a story that also defies any assumption that the Bible is full of perfect people whose lives have a constant upward trajectory or who always do the right thing or who neatly fit the role of heroes and heroines.

The story of Jacob and Esau has jealousy, family division, deception and manipulation, threats of violence and the power to carry it out. In today's reading, we get just a short snippet of the whole story of Jacob and Esau.

You likely know bits and pieces of the fuller story: (See Gen. 27 and following)

- Jacob and Esau are fraternal twins, sons of Isaac and Rebekah.
- Esau is the firstborn, coming out of the womb with red hair
- **Jacob's name means "heel grabber,"** because he was holding onto Esau's heel, but it's also a Hebrew idiom for being deceptive. Formally, it's from the verb for "to supplant, circumvent, overreach."

- **There is favoritism and tension:** Esau, the skillful hunter, is favored by Isaac their father, (Gen 25:27). Rebekah loved Jacob, who was quiet and stayed close to the tents
- One time, when returning from the field, Esau is famished and urgently asks for a bowl of stew Jacob has prepared. Jacob bargains with him, asking for the birthright Esau has as the older son. Impulsively, Esau agrees, saying aloud, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” (Gen 25:32). And Jacob gives him the bread and lentil stew.

The deception continues: this time wife and mother Rebekah is the deceiver as well. Isaac is elderly now and is nearing his death. He calls Esau, the firstborn, to ask him to hunt and bring him the savory food that he loves and then Isaac will bless him. Rebekah overhears all this and instructs Jacob to pretend to be Esau. While Esau is out hunting, Jacob brings goat meat from their flock, which his mother prepares in the way that Isaac likes that mimics the wild stew.

- Jacob puts on Esau’s clothes and even covers his arms and the back of his neck in lamb skin to be like the hairiness of his brother.
- Their father eats the dish of goat meat, prepared by Rebekah to taste like venison.
- He is confused, saying the voice sounds like Jacob’s, but he feels the hairiness of Esau.
- Jacob even directly says that he is Esau (Gen 27:19, 24).
- Their father, though confused, offers him a blessing of great abundance (Gen. 27:27-29).
- Esau comes in from his hunt, bringing the stew he has prepared. He declares that he is Esau. Isaac’s blessing upon Jacob has already been made.
- ⁴¹Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

Do you see yourself in this story?

“Is this the kind of story that is in the Bible?” –people might ask with some surprise.

This is a story with **tension and parental favoritism**. This is a story with **jealousy** or, if jealousy is not outwardly expressed, it’s at least a story of **rivalry**. There is **deception and manipulation**, not just on one person’s part, but on mother and son conspiring together. There is a **threat of violence** and then **separation and estrangement**.

This is a story of **flawed and broken people**. Do you see yourself in this story? Maybe not in the details and the extremes, but maybe in saying to yourself, “If God can work in these people and this family, then can I see God at work in me and in my family?”

It seems to me that when people in the Bible accomplish something of significance, it more often comes as a result of their recognition and acknowledgment of God and their dependence on God rather than one assuming the role of the hero or heroine. These are not perfect people, impervious to threats or danger, but flawed and broken and yearning for the reconciliation and restoration that overcomes brokenness and estrangement.

Can you see yourself in this story? Are you flawed and broken and longing for healing and restoration?

Jacob Approaches Esau—20 years later

So the last thing that Jacob hears from his brother is that an enraged Esau wishes to kill him. With Rebekah's help, he goes to her homeland and stays with her brother Laban, where he remains for the next 20 years.

That summary brings us to the start of today's reading. There is still fear as Jacob approaches:

- ¹Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him.

Esau has 400 men with him; it's a sign of physical force and power. What are his intentions--you can't tell. (Or, more significantly, Jacob can't tell.)

Seeing the 400 men, Jacob takes a cautionary approach—dividing people into groups so that if the intentions were hostile, then some of them—those in the rear--would have the chance to flee.

- Jacob takes a vulnerable posture himself, walking alone out in front of them, then, in a gesture of respect, as well as one of physical vulnerability, bows 7 times before Esau.
- “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (v. 4)

I asked the Bible study group on Tuesday how they could account for the reconciliation. What clues are there in the text, if any, that attribute the reconciliation to something or someone in particular? It's a hard question to answer--the text isn't that specific. Reconciliation isn't directly attributed to either Jacob or Esau, and yet they both were open to it and contributed to it.

- Jacob approaches, and assumes a position of physical vulnerability.
- Esau, the one more tangibly “harmed” by the loss of his birthright and blessing, ran to meet him and embraces him and kisses him, clearly gestures of forgiveness.

And, if the Bible is filled with stories of flawed and broken people, then let us acknowledge, too, that the Bible is also the story of a God of Grace who, in steadfast love, continues to reach out to offer these flawed and broken people the gift of reconciliation and restoration.

Stewardship is . . .

This is the last of 4 weeks focused on “Our Money Story.” In the broadest sense of the term, stewardship isn’t about money or making a pledge or a gift, but about recognizing a relationship of trust.

It is about recognizing God as one characterized by grace, as the giver of good gifts who entrusts us with wisely caring for those gifts. Living as a steward opens us up or orients us to God’s direction. We’re invited to place people, things, and relationships in healthy or proper order with each other.

If Jacob and Esau weren’t fully responsible for the reconciliation that they experienced, but both also contributed to it, then we too are both recipients of the grace of God and also open ourselves up to receiving that grace when we let loose of the tight grip we have on “stuff.” If we recognize that we, too, are flawed and broken people, then we will see that in the giving of gifts we find that our lives are transformed as we are being reconciled to God.

Thanks be to God for the gift of grace which saves and transforms flawed and broken people.