

Sermon — 11/22/20

Text – Genesis 33:4

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

Theme – “Jacob and Esau, Part II”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week’s sermon dealt with Jacob and his family. Specifically, with how he had tricked his father, cheated his brother, and stolen the blessing that ought to have been Esau’s. With how Jacob had run away, rather than face the consequences of his actions, and how he met and married his numerous wives — as well as all the trouble THAT brought to poor Jacob. Today’s lesson picks up where we left off last week: with Jacob and his growing family still living with his uncle Laban. But Jacob longs to go back home, to see his father and mother. He wants to return to the land God promised him and his descendants. However, there is one problem standing in his way: Esau.

Esau hated his brother Jacob for stealing the birthright. Esau was the older brother, and so by custom it belonged to him. Esau was his father Isaac’s favorite, by choice it should have gone to him. Esau was the stronger, by brute force it ought to be his. But it was not. Jacob had tricked blind Isaac into giving the birthright — the double-share of the inheritance and the promise of the Savior — to him. And there was no way of undoing it. Of course, though, if Jacob were dead then all bets were off. Then Esau would be the sole heir and ALL of it would be his. You can see why Esau hated Jacob; you can certainly also see why Jacob was afraid to return home. (pause)

Esau, we are told, was a strong, hairy man. From his youth he had been one who was given to hunting and living in the wilderness. It had toughened him up and made him hard. Esau was skilled in killing with weapons or his hands. From every angle, it would look like Esau would be the easy winner

in any physical contest with his brother Jacob. Especially when we remember that Esau was fueled with all that pent-up rage.

On the other hand, we are told that as a young man Jacob was meek. That he did not go out into the fields with the flocks, or into the forests to hunt, but instead he stayed at home with his mother, in the tents. He loved to cook and was more at home doing domestic tasks than the exertions of field work. Simply put, while Esau was a “man’s man”, Jacob was just a “momma’s boy”. And Jacob pretty much acknowledged that fact by his flight to Laban.

But something had happened in the years that followed. Jacob changed. He was not the selfish, scheming trickster that he had been. He was not the soft, namby-pamby weakling he had been. He was not the proud and self-absorbed coward he had been. No, the years had done much for him – years in which God shaped and changed Jacob: physically through hard labor, but even more importantly, emotionally and spiritually.

When the time was right – when all that God had wanted to accomplish in Jacob’s transformation had taken place – Jacob was led to return home to the Promised Land. Home to his father whom he had tricked. To his mother he had left behind. To his brother he had cheated. But knowing the extent of his sin — and the anger and hatred it had caused — Jacob sent out messengers ahead of him, to tell brother Esau of his approach, and offering Esau a large portion of his now-numerous herds and flocks and servants.

Jacob is trying to soften up Esau, he is trying to conciliate him, he is trying to alleviate his anger somewhat with what can only be called a bribe. Imagine, then, his surprise – and fear – when those messengers return with the news that Esau is coming to meet Jacob. And more ominous still, Esau is not coming alone. No, he is bringing 400 armed men with him!

Fearing the worst, Jacob finally does what he should have done first: he seeks God's guidance. Jacob pours out his heart to God. He reminds God of His promise to be with Jacob, to protect him, to bring him back home. He begs God to save him – and his family – from the hand of his vengeful brother. Jacob knows that there is just no way he and his band could stand up to Esau and his army of fighting men. Jacob can handle himself; surely some of his servants and maybe some of his older sons could also fight. But they are too few, trying to defend too many, against too strong an enemy. God is their only hope.

All night long Jacob stays and prays. Then the next morning he gets together a peace offering for Esau: hundreds of sheep, goats, camels, cattle, and donkeys. He sends them out with servants who are instructed to bring them to Esau with the word that Jacob is coming behind with his family. Jacob tells the servants to make it clear that Jacob is coming in humility and peace, that they are to address Esau as “lord” and Jacob as his servant. And then, again, Jacob spends the night in prayer.

The next morning Esau and his 400 warriors arrive. Still fearful for the safety of his family, Jacob divides them into four groups – with the two servant girls he had married and their children first, then Leah and her children, and finally Rachel and her son Joseph. Jacob then crosses the stream that separates Esau and his armed men from Jacob's party, and bows down low. What will Esau do? Will he threaten and abuse Jacob for all he has done? Will he tell Jacob to go away if he knows what's good for him? Will he attack and kill Jacob? Will he take everything away from Jacob, just as Jacob had done to him?

Imagine Jacob's surprise, then, when instead of violence or even harsh words, Esau comes to meet him on the run, his eyes full of tears, and then embraces him! The years have changed not just Jacob, but also his hard, savage brother. Esau asks Jacob who all these people are with him; Jacob says that they are the family God has given him in his exile – Esau's sisters-in-law and nephews. Esau then

asks about all the herds that Jacob had sent on ahead; Jacob says they were a gift to make Esau glad to see his brother again. But again Esau surprises Jacob – this time by refusing the gift. He has plenty, Esau says. God has provided well for him and he has no need (or desire) to take away these things from his brother.

Esau has forgiven Jacob. Fully, freely, completely. He holds no grudge, no hatred toward his brother. We might wonder how that could be, considering where we had left him earlier: breathing out threats of violence and murder and revenge. But God has worked in his heart too. Perhaps it was through the words and teaching of Isaac about God and His forgiving love. Perhaps it was through Esau's life experiences and how we all need forgiveness. Perhaps it was through some direct revelation from God.

But however it happened, Esau is not the same hateful, vengeful, frightening man he was. No, he has forgiven his brother from the bottom of his heart. And he shows it by his words and by his actions. Nothing pleases him more than to be reconciled to his brother – God has forgiven Esau his sins, and in response to that grace, that mercy, that love Esau forgives too. Even Jacob's greatest sin – of betrayal, of treachery, of theft, of disobedience and dishonor – it is gone, washed away in the blood of the Savior promised to come from Jacob's line. (pause)

I think the applications of this lesson to our lives are pretty clear. Like Jacob, we have all done some pretty bad things. Words we wish we could take back. Thoughts which were pure evil. Actions that make us blush just to recall them. We have hurt those close to us in so many ways, let alone others that we have trampled on the way to our desires. And who knows what we have done to others that we maybe cannot remember, or did not even notice that we had done!

We worry about how we can ever make up for those terrible things, for the hurt and pain and grief we caused, for the anger and resentment that we know must exist towards us. In our lesson, Jacob

knew he had done wrong to his brother Esau. He knew he had sinned against him (and their father ) when he tricked poor, blind Isaac into giving him the birthright instead of Esau. He knew how much it angered Esau. At first, when he fled home, Jacob's concern was more about how that anger and desire for revenge would affect him. But over the years, he learned that his sin hurt others too, that **many** suffered because of what he had done.

What was he to do? How could he make amends? Was it possible to fix the damage he had done? Jacob's first thought was to try to appease Esau by sending him a bribe. But could goats and sheep, camels and donkeys really pay the price caused by years of hurt? Next Jacob sent messengers with sweet and humble words. But can words erase what he had done? Then Jacob tried to play on Esau's sympathy by parading the poor, defenseless women and children of his camp before him. But none of those things could settle the debt of Jacob's sin. None of those things caused Esau to forgive. No, only God was able to work that miracle in the heart of stern, fierce, fiery Esau.

So it is with us too. When we see the error of our ways, the enormity of our sin, the depth of pain we have caused, quite often our first reaction is to try to fix things ourselves. We try all sorts of things. Maybe we try to buy our way out of the mess – with promises, with gifts, with whatever we think might work. Maybe we try to grovel and debase ourselves, so the other person will feel flattered and superior. Maybe we play on his emotions and try to manipulate him into some sort of reconciliation. But none of those things solve sin, do they? None of them really take it away or remove the offense and settle the debt.

No, the only thing that settles sin and its consequences is forgiveness. Forgiveness that is not purchased or won or deserved by us, by forgiveness freely given out of love and mercy and grace. Forgiveness that comes only because the price has been paid – not by us – but by Christ on the cross. There the full debt for all sin has been paid for us. All the pain, all the suffering, all the hell that we and

our sins deserve has been poured out onto Him. He has borne our griefs and sorrows. He has been stricken, smitten, and afflicted for us. He has been wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. (pause)

Have you sinned against someone? Does anyone hold a grudge against you? Do you need to be reconciled to another? Well, the only way to truly address that situation is through confession and absolution. Go to that person, confess your sin and seek forgiveness. Not because you deserve it. Not because the other person is so wonderful. But simply because of what Christ has done.

And if you are the one holding the grudge, if you are the one who has been wronged, then remember what we pray each time in the Lord's Prayer: "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*". For a Christian, forgiving others is not optional. It is required. Jesus has paid for that person's sin too, just as He has paid for yours. So if you refuse to forgive, in effect you are denying that Jesus has paid for that sin. And you know that is just not true. No, you have been blessed with full and complete forgiveness from God – who truly had the right to be angry and just in punishing us. And so you now reflect that same forgiveness, that same mercy, that same love to others when they sin against you.

I know that oftentimes that is not easy to do. Our human nature wants to cling to that anger, that hatred, that desire for revenge. We want justice, we say. Well, look to the cross and you will see God's justice on display – the justice that handled all sin. Yours and your neighbor's. Forgive. Be reconciled. Love. As your Father has forgiven and loved you. In our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Offertory/Prayer

FE – Offertory/Prayer