

August 23, 2020
Reconciliation, This Side of Heaven
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Genesis 33:1-13

Jacob and Esau Meet

33 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. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He 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. ⁵ When 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." ⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸ Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." ⁹ But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." ¹⁰ Jacob 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. ¹¹ Please 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." ¹³ But 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. ¹⁴ Let 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."

God goes by the name "The Fear" in several Frederick Buechner novels, including *The Son of Laughter*. *The blessing I stole from Esau* was The Fear's idea, Jacob says in this memoir posing as a novel (read from page 86-87). I have no idea upon what Bible page the story of the blessing ends or if it has ended yet. But Genesis 33 is where our Sunday morning time with Jacob ends, with this reconciliation, such as it is, between Jacob, his brother Esau and *The Fear*, apart from whom there is no reconciliation to speak of.

First, let's pray. *Perhaps we have feared you too little, O God, treated this life too casually for the frail and fleeting gift it is. Perhaps we could do with greater reverence for the breathing sacredness of life that surrounds us all the time. Perhaps then we would be more receptive to the courage you offer, to tend the irreconciled places in our lives, in our*

relationships, the still so tender bruises in our memories. May your word offer us new hope, O God, that we might find new healing. Amen.

He might have left the lot of them a mile or two behind when he went out to meet his brother. Or even taken a company of grown men with him. That's what Esau himself did. But from his nose to his toes, Jacob was a coward. He brings his women and his children with him, counting on the decency of other men not to attack him in their seeing. Lining them up according to his own favoritism, Rachel and Joseph furthest back, concubines up front, Leah and her kids in the middle.

Jacob bows seven times to Esau. Esau falls on Jacob, hugging him, kissing his neck. Both of them weeping great, big, snotty weeps. The tenor changes once the crying's over. It's slow and tense and guarded, a negotiation wherein neither trusts the other. When it's over Jacob has conceded nothing. Esau accepts Jacob's terms, almost without comment. Esau goes home to Seir. Jacob limps off to Shechem where he buys a plot of land. And right there, as the Bible story goes, that is the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau.

Every grown-up human being I ever met has at least a handful of broken relationships. One that doesn't work right; one that is still estranged; one that is festering and tender, just begging to be picked at and squeezed; or one so full of battery and abuse, you now wish you hadn't started listening to this sermon. I do have a good word, if you can try to stay with me.

Church – religion – has led some of us to confuse Hollywood with heaven, and heaven with this world, to imagine that biblical reconciliation looks like the ending of the movie *The Notebook*. No, it doesn't. It looks like this, two brothers negotiating like they are Kennedy and Khrushchev and reconciliation is nothing more than detente. Religion has also, at times, led to believe that reconciliation is entirely on us. No, it isn't.

Jacob has to deal with his God before he deals with his brother. And even then, he gets them mixed up, remember? Twice in a day he says, *I have seen the face of God*: when he wrestled with God and didn't die, and again when Esau welcomed him instead of killing him. When it comes to reconciliation, The Fear – that is, God – does the heavy lifting. Jacob wouldn't have gone, save on orders of The Fear. He would have run away, except The Fear caught him by the collar and made him stay. The Fear, I would offer, had already worked on Esau. And it only took twenty years to get them both in the same place.

Think what we know of God, friends, that which is hard to know when our minds are on those itchy, broken and bruised relationships of ours. The work of reconciliation is done by God in Jesus Christ. Remember – *once and for all*? *Once and for all* doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. *Once and for all* dealing with our own brokenness and estrangement from God. *Once and for all* removing fear of death from our lives and from our life together. *Once and for all* relieving us of doing for others what God has already done for them.

It is not all on us, friends. God has done the heavy lifting. We need to take that with us into our memories and into the work of real time reconciliation, the lesson for which I suggest we look to Esau. I've no idea what went on with them those twenty years before. But when his abuser shows up, I see evidence of healing. He had a message, "Jacob is on the way," and so goes out to meet him, taking an army that he hoped he didn't have to use. But he didn't take his family. Because a wise father wouldn't do that. A responsible, grown-up adult human doesn't barter with his children. Now Esau does fall to weeping when he sees his gray-bearded twin. But his broken heart doesn't cloud his judgment for a minute.

Esau can love Jacob without trusting him. He can feel his feelings, twenty years of grief and rage, without letting Jacob's craziness breach the boundary of his healing. And Jacob tries. Esau loves his brother but he does not trust him. Love and trust are not synonyms. Esau doesn't trust Jacob. Neither does he argue with him. Offers are made. Counteroffers too. Jacob gets everything he wants. Esau nothing, yet does not seem disappointed.

No satisfying happy ending. Just Esau going home, Jacob limping into the sunset with his four baby mamas and their children. Twice more they are mentioned in the same paragraph: *"Esau settled some distance from his brother Jacob because their possessions were too great for them to live together; the land could not support all their livestock."* And then, *"When Isaac died at 180 years old, he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob."*

Who's to say they weren't as happy as they could be, this side of heaven, friends? And who's to say that can't count as reconciliation, where every one of us is broken and in need of prayer? My four takeaways from our last look at the story of Jacob are these, friends:

First, The Fear is always, always in the mix. (Jacob had it out with The Fear before he met up with his brother, but only because God got in the way. Jacob was going the other direction – remember? – because it was hard and scary.) That's because we can make much bigger messes than we can clean up. Jacob is the father of the nations who were to be a blessing to the world, except the nations are always trying to annihilate each other. So God has to intervene, so we don't self-destruct. God has a stake in our reconciliation. We might use that to our own advantage, friends – fret less about what we have to do with the enemy; spend more time seeking God's wisdom and courage, since we know God is on the side of reconciliation.

Secondly, forgiving someone, even to their face with witnesses all around, does not require us to trust them. Especially when they have a rap sheet like Jacob. Reserving our trust for people who treat it faithfully is a faithful way to live.

Third, this side of heaven, expectations about reconciliation are best kept low. Reconciliation is not fairness. It is not the offender getting what they deserve. And reconciliation is not the evaporation of all that happened that was sad and hurtful or wrong. Jacob

and Esau might have met and talked it out, had they been twentieth-century westerners. Instead, Jacob brought lots of presents that Esau didn't want and took anyway. Esau offered help Jacob wouldn't take and Esau didn't push. Then they lived decades more as neighbors. And sometimes that's what reconciliation looks like, friends, this side of heaven: two broken human beings doing the best they can with a truth too hard to speak between them.

There's a lot that we don't know, because there is a lot the Bible doesn't tell. Who knows what The Fear might have been doing in those later decades? Maybe they started over there and became good friends who never spoke of the past. Maybe when Rachel died, Esau stood by Jacob while he cried. Who knows what The Fear is doing in each other's hearts? Who knows what The Fear might do in mine, should my past come 'round asking for my favor like Jacob asked for Esau's? The reconciliation we need most is business already taken care of. What taste of it we get this side of heaven is peace we make mostly make with ourselves and on our knees, ready to receive whatever the Fear has for us. Would you pray with me?