

When Dysfunction Is Addressed

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 07/19/20
At Crossroads United Methodist Church
Waunakee, WI

During the past five weeks, we have been exploring the theme of “Dysfunction in God’s Family” – with the focus on the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Book of Genesis.

Last week we looked at the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Esau’s request for a bowl of stew was countered by a demand for the birthright that would otherwise come to Esau. And Esau agreed to that demand.

The story continues when Mother Rebekah and Jacob team up to deceive the Father Isaac and the other twin son, Esau out of Isaac’s blessing. The theme dysfunction in the Book of Genesis and in this particular story of Jacob and Esau points to the brokenness of all human relationship, the breakdown of true human community in family and in world.

But today, we also encounter the surprising in-breaking of grace.

Today, Jacob watches a cloud of dust coming closer and closer until he can make out distinct figures, now almost faces. Behold, Esau is coming. Jacob with fear and trembling divides his children and wives putting the least favored first, then Rachel and Joseph last of all, then he himself went forward “bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near his brother.”

Though Jacob had been given a new name, he acts much like the old Jacob we have known. One is almost embarrassed for him by his bowing in groveling subservience.

But Esau, what of him? That noble brother runs to meet Jacob, embraces him, kisses him on the neck and they both weep for joy. Instead of lethal grappling there is this embrace of fraternal affection. Jacob is struck down not by Esau’s sword but by his love.

While Jacob continues to refer to Esau as my Lord, Esau refers to Jacob as my brother. What a stark contrast between the fearful calculated subservience of Jacob with the loving generous spontaneity of Esau.

Jacob is overcome by this gracious demonstration from his brother. In what must be one of the most beautiful lines in the entire Bible, Jacob says to his brother “Truly to see your Face is like seeing the Face of God with such favor have you received me.”

You see, mirrored in the face of Esau was a forgiveness which, in a single moment replaced a lifetime of treachery and guilty flight. In the experience of their reconciliation, Jacob knows that God is present.

After Nelson Mandela was released from prison and then elected President of South Africa, he said, that if he hated his captors, if he allowed his understandable rage to consume him, he would remain their prisoner forever. So, wanting to be truly free, he chose to forgive them.

Mandela persuaded his old friend Desmond Tutu to delay his retirement and chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Mandela planned to establish. Victims would be invited to tell their stories at public hearings. Perpetrators of violence would be invited to testify and tell their stories in exchange for clemency. No one thought it would work. And it wasn’t perfect. But South Africa managed to avoid the bloody cataclysm everyone thought was coming. Strong men told the truth and wept, and healing slowly began to happen.

It is so very difficult to forgive. It seems sometimes that we actually enjoy our resentment and anger over wrongs committed against us.

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It is so very difficult to forgive. In his introduction to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Tutu wrote, "When we look around us at some of the conflict areas of the world, it becomes increasingly clear that there is not much of a future without forgiveness."

The truth Archbishop Tutu understood is a truth embedded in the Christian tradition all the way back to its roots in Judaism, namely that only the wounded can heal, only the offended one can forgive. The person who betrayed can apologize over and over, but reconciliation doesn't happen until the one betrayed makes a decision deep in his or her heart to forgive.

Jesus Christ calls you and me to live like that. "Forgive us our sins, our betrayals, as we forgive those who have sinned against and betrayed us."

He calls us in our families, our marriages, our intimate relationships—where this becomes most difficult—with our friends and colleagues, in our politics, to forgive as a way of living and being, to extend grace and reconciliation as an expression of our trust in him.

One of Jesus' best stories was about a terribly wronged father who runs down the road to welcome home a wayward, sinful son, to forgive and embrace him before he can say his apology.

And the genius of Jesus' own Jewish faith and our Christian faith based on him is the amazing notion that God does not harbor anger and resentment; that God does not remember iniquities and betrayals, small, large; that God is a forgiving, reconciling God who wants all of us, you and me, to know the peace and security of God's steadfast love and to express that same holy love and forgiveness in all we do.