

...*Esau ran to meet him.* A sermon preached on September 4, 2016, the final of a series on Jacob. St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC, by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: GENESIS 33

II CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

Jacob's story now moves swiftly to the final scenes. The first verse of chapter 33 in Genesis sets the scene.

It is over for Jacob, over for his family – or so Jacob believes.

For the last picture we have of Esau is his lament that he has been tricked again by his twin brother This time out of his father Isaac's blessing.

Twenty years has passed since that incident.

Long time to nurse a hate

Jacob has wrestled these years with guilt.

So as Jacob sees Esau coming – and Esau is running – Jacob can only give thanks that the end will be mercifully quick.

There is no running away for Jacob this time.

The limp he has makes running impossible.

He is now vulnerable in a way he has never been before.

All brother Jacob can do is to acknowledge Esau in humility (the bulletin frontispiece

Sometimes though life surprises us – and for Jacob this is one of those times.

Esau embraces him – not to give him a kiss of death
But to convey – I am not going to kill you and your family, brother

What you did to me is something long ago.

I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself (vs. 8)

Whoa!!! What is going on here?

We understand Jacob's stunned question, **Why should my Lord be so kind to me? (vs.15)**

The narrator gives no answer

The story moves on

Jacob continues to appear now and again in the subsequent chapters of Genesis

We see him principally as an old man, who has lost his beloved Rachel

He now spends his time living with his other wives and his many sons.

Jacob is not always wise.

He continues to make many mistakes.

For the most part,

The mistakes have their origin not in treachery and deceit

Rather, in the deep love and special memories he carries for Rachel

This results in a favored child attitude of Rachel and Jacob's only child – Joseph – but that is next summer's story!

We come back to the scene Sandra read from Genesis 33.

Lots of questions. Lots of “I wonder”

I wonder what has taken place in Esau’s life to affect such an open arms forgiveness of Brother Jacob.

I wonder has Esau come to terms with his own personality quirks and impulsiveness that allowed him to give away his birthright for a bowl of red stuff.

I wonder has Esau realized that an unforgiving spirit and attitude is just plain toxic in living here and now.

I wonder whether deep down anything between the brothers has really changed

Esau disappears off the scene very quickly

Did the brothers come to terms with hurts of the past about as well as they could

Would they ever have been “Best Friends Forever”?

In the opening pages of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together which I think needs to be read every year by every one of us who call ourselves Christian,

Bonhoeffer bluntly and with heart conviction points out

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.... it is of course that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the

lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from the utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

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And one of the ways this sense of community is trampled underfoot is when we who are part of the community of faith either cannot or will not see the importance of offering forgiveness, seeking forgiveness, practicing reconciliation with a brother or sister in Christ.

This makes for a climate of negativism and spite. Not only is such bad for our own spiritual health, but this sort of toxicity spreads throughout any community of faith.

And make no mistake – such toxicity is deadly – I have lived with it, been singed by it, been drawn into it because there seemed no alternative. \ And been by God's grace rescued from it.

Look,

I have been part of faith communities most of my life, more than half of that as a congregational minister.

I know that Christians are not perfect people. I know sometimes we do and say things that just give others fits.

They make me so angry, frustrated, ticked, miffed. well you fill in the adjective!

I know we lash out at others because we are fearful and threatened by newness and change.

I know we lash out because we just know we are right and they are wrong!

I know we hesitate to reconcile with or forgive others because it just seems so much easier to walk away.

Or, we don't want to upset people.

Historically, Presbyterians have not been good at honouring and following the counsel from this morning's Epistle reading of II Corinthians.

With the result too often moving between two extremes – too soft on the matter of reconciliation or being the hammer of God – too judgmental.

The cultivation of the ongoing practice of reconciliation within a community of faith, as St. Paul sees faith communities practicing it, is worthy of more than one sermon.

But let's begin with the Jacob and Esau story and highlight some important reminders about forgiveness and its practice and reconciliation.

To do this, I want to tell you another story – a story about the reconciliation of two elderly ladies who were active members of the smaller church I served in New Brunswick.

Why their story and not just use the Biblical story?

Because sometimes we think the Bible stories are not our stories,

Their experiences with God are not as real as ours.

Their experiences in fact often prime our experiences.

The two ladies in Port Elgin, New Brunswick. Hilda and Nan were incredibly strong willed and opinionated women.

The church kitchen and its use was a particular flash point.

Like big cats in the wild they often circled each other in the kitchen, waiting for one to slip up or do something “wrong”.

I learned early in my time in Port Elgin that they had been at logger heads over many things for a number of years. – Hilda always wanted the church to reach out to the wider community; Nan – very fussy about the appearance and things done at the church

During Holy Week of one year, Hilda, who was at that point, terminally ill with brain cancer, summoned me to her home on Good Friday.

It was in essence to hear her life confession.

Near the end of our conversation, Hilda said to me, "Herb, I want you to pray for me because I know I have to forgive Nan and I have to ask for her forgiveness. I want you to pray that reconciliation between us can happen before I die.

Ever notice how often the Lord places us in situations that force us to acknowledge that in the end He really is in control?

For outwardly I did pray that both Hilda and Nan would be reconciled, but little inner voices kept whispering, 'You know the personalities involved Herb, You know Hilda's cancer is rapidly advancing, Time is not on your side for a positive answer to your prayer'

Yet, I was surprised AGAIN of how great our God really is.

On Easter Sunday, as I greeted people as they came into church, Nan came up to me with tears in her eyes, "Mr. Hilder...Hilda phoned me on Friday and I saw her yesterday and she asked for my forgiveness

I gave it to her and asked her to forgive me.

Then we just hugged and cried. She is not going to get better is she Mr. Hilder? No, Nan, Hilda went

into hospital late last night. Her tumor has begun to grow again!"

After church services that day, I saw Hilda in the hospital and though heavily medicated for pain, she smiled when she saw me.

We both knew that God had worked a miracle in reconciliation between her and Nan

Loose ends were tied up

At the end of the week, Hilda slipped into a coma and died early the following week.

From the stories then of Jacob and Esau and Hilda and Nan, what points can be made.

Reconciliation and forgiveness begin with God.

The degree to which we believe we have been reconciled to God,

The degree to which we understand and can live with the extent of God's forgiveness of us first, to that same degree we will move to reconcile with our brother and sister in Christ.

We will move to forgive and seek forgiveness from our brother and sister in Christ

Everything we do,

Every action we take,

Every thought we have, is a response to what God has done first.

Reconciliation must be intentional

Jacob knew he had done wrong

Hilda knew she had done wrong

Both knew they had to make it right.

They had to take the first step.

One of the most overlooked and often avoided verses in Bible is Jesus' counsel of this intentionality

¹⁵ 'If another member of the church^[a] sins against you,^[b] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.'^[c] [Matt.18:15]

Far too often many of us resort to a much more juvenile solution.

We go to everyone else to plead our side of the story, to justify our anger and we don't first

Go to the person who has offended us.

Or we approach the situation of telling the person who has offended like a rhino in full charge!

Over the years, I have seen this happen far too often before worship or at coffee time.

And it does not end well.

It also makes me wonder when people do this before church, what does this do to their own sense of worship or the sense of worship the offender had before "the charge"?

Reconciliation needs to be bathed in prayer.

Jacob prayed. Hilda prayed, I prayed

The process of reconciliation is difficult.

Feelings have been hurt
Hearts may have been hardened.
God needs to soften hard hearts – and only God can
do this.
Only He can ease emotions, heal wounds and bring
understanding. Prayer does change things in ways
we can never imagine or foresee.

*Reconciliation demands humility and requires
vulnerability*

Jacob humbled himself before Esau (Gen 33:3)
Esau and Jacob weep as they hug (Genesis 33:4) –
that is a stance of vulnerability
Hilda phoned Nan after I left on that Good Friday.
When they met on Saturday, they both cried and
hugged.
Hilda realized that her need to be right over things
that Nan did and opinions she had needed to stop.
I would love to have been the proverbial fly on the
wall at the meeting of these two very opinionated,
very compassionate and very 'dedicated to the
church in their own way' people.

One more thing for this morning to highlight in
these two stories – one a long time ago, one not so
long ago...

*Reconciliation does not necessarily mean that the people
involved will be Best Friends Forever.*

Jacob and Esau go their separate ways.

But it is clear that Jacob's guilt over a nasty memory is lanced of its poison and toxicity.

Esau too is able to move on.

In the matter of Hilda and Nan, Hilda died shortly after their reconciliation.

Had Hilda received a physical healing from her cancer, I do not think she and Nan would have been Best Friends Forever.

However, and this is important—I think they would have agreed to peaceful and less acrimonious co-existence.

They would have disagreed and continued to have differences of opinion,

But I think the edge in the disagreements would have been absent.

Things like the placement of cups and saucers, the order of serving food, the table settings, what table cloths to be used, as well as who did what would have been put into a proper perspective and not seen as key to the further existence of the congregation in Port Elgin.

The advancement of the Kingdom of God would have been placed back as centre of the work of the congregation.

Certainly Nan remained opinionated and stubborn, but the level of her edginess and crispness had lessened

The stuff of reconciliation and forgiveness is not easy – scripture never alludes or states it is!

But,

If we cannot intentionally practice it in an ongoing way within a community of faith – this or any other – with our brothers and sisters in Christ, *Then what message DO WE REALLY HAVE, for a very needy and much wounded world? AMEN*