

Forgiving for Yourself

Menno Mennonite Church

July 28, 2024

Purpose: To explore the “why” of forgiveness, especially when you hold the wrong.

Message: Forgiveness is an outgrowth of peace and, often, carries its own reward

Scripture: Genesis 33:1-17 (I will read); 1 John 2:9-15a

Synopsis: Forgiveness holds a great importance. It is the stuff of making peace—with ourselves, our world, and with God. Yet the practicalities of forgiveness do not always go to plan. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not always welded one to the next as we might wish they were. Sometimes “I forgive you” comes as much as an insult as the injury in the first place. Yet we forgive for ourselves and in ourselves that we might know healing and peace.

Genesis 33:1-17

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.”

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?”

¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.

¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth,
and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle;
therefore the place is called Succoth.

Sometimes we come in at a high spot in the story and you have to keep up. I have had the somewhat shocking revelation the other day that I needed to explain traditional, linear media to my children—you know the type that does not come with a rewind button. We were watching some of the opening ceremonies for the Olympics which, if you didn't take opportunity to catch it, held a certain cinematic, French flare to it all, using a lot of symbols and signs to tell the story. The type of thing that needs some good explanation to go with it. We jumped in at one of the moments of these symbols that the kids were wondering about and I was trying to catch up with myself and the expectation was simple: rewind it 10 minutes so we can see what was going on. The concept that live television could not be rewound prior to where you started watching baffled them entirely. Let alone the notion that not everything can be paused to go get a snack. It is a strange world that we are translating into.

Fortunate for us our Story of Jacob and Essau CAN be rewound because that is precisely what it requires. This is an operatic story that occupies that last half of Genesis as we follow Jacob and his family through many chapters and eventually down to Egypt. Suffice it to say this moment of with Essau has a back story and it is a good one.

Jacob—the one who was just renamed Israel, the struggler the chapter before as he wrestled with an angel—was a serial schemer. According to Genesis 25, Jacob came out of the womb fighting and cheating, and his name could be translated “cheater” or “deceiver.” He lived up to his name. Jacob's life had been filled with deception and manipulation. He conned his twin brother into trading his birthright for a bowl of soup and lied to his father to receive the blessing meant for his brother. As a result of his actions he flees for his life to his uncle Laban with his brother Essau promising to kill him the next time he saw him. True to form, he schemes there too, marrying the daughters of the family, and skimming the flocks to enrich himself. Funnily enough he ends up leaving Laban's company in much the same way he left Essau's. It is this story that leads him to the wrestling with an angel and this story that characterizes him up until now.

With that setup, we can look at what we have here. We often hold up this particular story as a peace story of the Old Testament. The setup is there—you have the estranged brothers the threat of things going profoundly sideways, so much so that Jacob spends a good deal of time plotting how he might best approach Essau to win favor. His worry is more about a sense of shrewd survival than particularly the intent of making peace with his brother. Finally when the

two do meet there is forgiveness. Either by impression or big heartedness Essau forgives everything that Jacob has done and embraces him. That is where we stop reading, because that is generally where we want the story to end, as we know that there are more episodes in this long soap opera yet to come. The reconciliation has happened and that is the end of it. Essau forgives Jacob.

But it is not the end. Having gotten Essau out of the way with a promise to follow after Jacob does anything but what he says he will do. Instead he reverts to form and makes of the other direction. Jacob may very well be beginning a new life and new chapter with a blessing and new name, but he is still very much Jacob. And it prompts the question: what do we make of the forgiveness then? How do we square Jacob—the hero of the story—repenting and turning by not making good on his promise, not actually turning from the path that he had been on? For that matter what do we make of ourselves and our world when we fail the forgiveness that we seek, that we extend, that we receive?

If you are wondering why any and all of this is important, let me give you a few suggestions. First it is real. We know that forgiveness, our reconciling ourselves with what is will always be part of life, often the hardest part of life. Here we have an example of precisely that. If we are inclined to think that the Old Testament is just that—old and not hugely relevant to our world and way, I give you this as a case in point. Sometimes the script of reconciliation and forgiveness does not run smoothly. Sometimes we can put ourselves out there and not get what we might want. Sometimes repentance and an actual turning from the way thing are and are meant to be proves far from simple and way less than easy. It can be tempting to wonder whether Essau regretted forgiving Jacob, or how long we waited for the promised visit that never came. Can forgiveness work; is forgiveness relevant when you may be the only one in the frame who can do the work of forgiving?

If we are to live in this world, we must forgive; in big ways and in small ways. Egos will be bruised, offense will be given, injury will be suffered, most often by the people we love the most. Offenses of those distant to us hold no power because they are precisely that—distant. But where there is closeness, forgiveness must follow. We must forgive, or suffer the consequences. If we don't we quickly find ourselves bound by the hurts of past and hampered by the sometimes impossible task of letting go. Forgiveness is first and foremost an act of healing, but not automatically in the ways that we often think. We expect a healed and whole relationship

on the other side of forgiveness. Sometimes that just isn't possible. Yet forgiveness of what is still a must for our own sakes. We know that holding resentments, regrets and grudges carry their own weight and that weight quickly becomes unbearable as we when we let our own hurts fester with us long beyond their useful life span. Forgiveness is about unchaining ourselves from the task of maintaining the hurt, regardless of what comes out the other side. The theologian and writer Henri Nouwen observes: "Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom."

Friends, we are not meant for chains. We are meant for freedom. We do not know a whole lot else of Essau after his run in with Jacob. They gather together to bury their father and there is an articulation of Essau's lineage to explain the clans resulting from him, but that is it. Yet I think Essau's forgiveness was real and consequential because it is was grace that he chose to extend. We was able to release that which was his right—his right to resentment—in order to live new life. The impact on Jacob may have been profound or not, but it did create the story book ending that we think it might have or should have. He goes on his way isolating and avenging himself at most every opportunity. But I like to think that the peace that was made between Essau and Jacob was one that served them both well, but perhaps first and foremost for Essau. He forgive without contingency and in doing so he liberates himself from the burden of carrying the project of resentment. As such, this also looks to echo God's forgiveness as well.

We are to forgive as we have been forgiven by God: fully and completely. We forgive that we might be set free from that which binds us most tightly—the specter of our own failures. I think the forgiveness that we are most stingy with is the forgiveness we extend to our own selves. As much as we must and should seek forgiveness from those who we have done wrong, we should also embrace that forgiveness for ourselves too. It is one thing to accept that someone else has done wrong to you and you are in a position. And note: forgiving someone is not automatically the same as continuing to be in relationship with them where behavior and injury are just too injurious to be endured. We trap many in insisting on forgiveness while neglecting accountability and safety.

Yet most importantly understanding ourselves as forgiven, fully and finally, often takes some doing and proves the most difficult forgiveness that we can muster. It all boils down to perception. We assume the God is a whole lot like us; God forgives, but in the mechanistic of ways. There have to words to be said, oaths to be honored and prayers to be made in order to set up the conditions for God to consider our pardon. We know what we would expect of someone who has done something bad, and we strongly suspect that God does the same thing—act like Jacob showing contrition. Yet God comes and embraces us and invites us to follow along without any of those demands. Our expectations of God is that God feels as bad about ourselves as we do, and can never accept us as we are. We chain ourselves to God's desire to get even with us, and sometimes struggle to understand that we are indeed the one who Jesus died in love for.

We forgives that we might be free. We forgive that we need not burden ourselves with expectation and guilt. We forgive to heal relationships and situations yes, but we also forgive—rightly—in order to heal ourselves from that which would chain us to guilt, shame, anger, and punishment. Peacemakers forgive so they then can be free. In this there is hope, promise, and healing. We but only take it.

May we forgive even when the healing never comes. And may we live in God's forgiveness that we might know life fully and live in God's good promise. Amen.