

Message
July 16-17, 2011
Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Climbing To Forgiveness

The book of Genesis, over and over again, is about God's call for us. God calling the whole of creation into being. God calling us, as the family of God, to be God's most holy people, a special community, to witness God's love and forgiveness in the world.

Last week, in Genesis, we left the family saga of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob and Esau, with Esau, having so little regard for his birthright, so little care for the responsibilities God has given him, that he bargains away his birthright to his younger brother Jacob. We asked ourselves: what obligations do we have in honoring God's blessings in our life?

As the saga continues, we learn that Esau, in seeking the honored birthright blessing of the firstborn from their father, Isaac, has been tricked out of his rightful blessing. The family tension builds as Esau plans to retaliate. In an effort to protect Jacob, their mother, Rebekah, sends Jacob off into exile to live with her brother, Laban.

In today's reading the family conflict comes to a temporary halt. Instead the story shifts to a visual interaction between Jacob and God, where God is at work creating God's own as people of forgiveness; repentant, and reconciled.

So, when we're in those places where the pain is so great, and the darkness overcomes, sometimes it is that we just get in bed, put the covers over our head, and fall into fitful sleep. Well, banished from conventional society, in his fugitive state, of fear, terror and loneliness, this is exactly what Jacob does. He falls asleep. He dreams of angels climbing up and down a ladder. In the dream, uniting the glory of heaven with earthly challenge, God, forever hopefully present, promises Jacob, "I am with you,...I shall keep you safe wherever you go,..." Awakening to the surprising fact that God is in this place of exile, where God is unexpected, the dream becomes a turning point for Jacob. Jacob vows to change his ways, to repent.

This summer, with Christ Church, we are spending some time in, "A Summer Read". Please join in if you'd like. "A Summer Read" is a very low key, four book offering over the next 6 weeks. Look in your bulletin and check the website to learn more about the books. One book in "A Summer Read" is scholar and theologian Marcus Borg's recent book, [Speaking Christian](#).

Borg writes a chapter on forgiveness and repentance reminding us that repentance is what we do *because* we're forgiven. God's grace, God's favor upon us, is the given for us in forgiveness. To know God's forgiveness means we choose to live a changed life. A changed life is the act of repentance, turning to God, changed because of God. In fact, he says, the word "repent" literally means, "to go beyond the mind that we have."

Jacob dreams away as God, standing beside him, forever present, especially in places of the unexpected, promises the freedom of hope. This is a God who has already forgiven; a God who in spite of Jacob's deceit, calls Jacob, and plans to accompany him, as he leads God's people, to well being and security.

God asks us to go beyond the mind we have; to see ourselves the way God sees us; partnered with God, in God's world, loved, forgiven. Trusting in the power of God's grace, Jacob awakens ready to live a changed repentant life. No longer does he want to live in fear. He marks his dream state as a holy place, and names it Bethel, the house of God.

Confident, Jacob chooses the path of assurance that God is with him, God will keep him; God will give him what he needs and God will sustain him, over and over again. God is enough. Faithfully repentant, Jacob sets the course journeying for forgiveness.

Traveling the 400 some miles from Bethel to Haran, Jacob stops at the local well where he meets and impresses the love of his life, Laban's daughter, the beautiful shepherdess, Rachel. She tells her father of this powerful sojourner. Jacob and uncle Laban happily form a kinship and strike up a bargain. Jacob will work for Laban seven years to win the hand of Rachel in marriage. It's all in the family, making for a good match. So, we're not prepared for the abrupt contrast of Laban's trickery. Should his oldest, Leah, not be married first, Laban will be shamed. So, on Jacob's wedding night, well meaning Laban maneuvers Leah into Jacob's marriage bed.

While a family member, Jacob is still a foreigner, recognizing he has little ground on which to stand. Failing to doubt and question his future, and trusting in the strength of God's faithfulness in him, Jacob forgives Laban's deceit and agrees to work for Laban another seven years to win Rachel's hand in marriage.

The saga continues and for the first time since Jacob's dream encounter with God, the mention of God appears. God moves about, healing and reconciling, as only God can. In the marriage, Leah is unloved, and for Rachel, history is repeated. As with grandparents Abraham and Sarah, and parents, Isaac and Rebekah, initially, Rachel is barren. Jealousy mounts as Leah gives birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah, all the while, hoping to earn the one thing she can't have, Jacob's love. Slave girls of both Rachel and Leah bear sons, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

In the end, God blesses Rachel. She gives birth to Joseph, the favored son, and eventually, Benjamin. Throughout God's promises are fulfilled. Jacob fathers the descendants of God's great people, the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jacob and his family prosper earning the jealous rivalry of his uncle Laban and Laban's sons. Remembering his dream, and God's promise to return him home to the land of his ancestors, Jacob gathers up his family and all their possessions and begins the long trek back to Canaan. But, not without family conflict. Three days into the journey Laban learns of Jacob's departure and pursues Jacob accusing him of stealing his family authority, having discovered that the family icons are missing. In the end, Jacob and

Laban form a treaty, forgiving one another's mistreatment, reconciling, trusting in God's grace for what is to come.

Now, I'm not sure how it is for you. But, I believe that forgiveness in a family unit is the hardest thing we have to do. There are lots of reasons. Family knows our every flaw, all our secrets. Family are the ones we're most likely to cross paths with again. So, the hurt is too often in the forefront; right in our face, ready to pain us over and over again. We have our guard up. But, from the beginning of creation, God calls us to return, return to God's love, to God's grace. God's desire is for us to go back; not to the same relationship; but to take reconciling steps in forming a new relationship, trusting in how God is active, loving and leading us to relationships of wholeness and wellness.

As a child, growing up in Philadelphia, our family would travel to Ohio each summer to visit my father's mother, my grandmother, and daddy's sister and brother in law, my aunt and uncle. My sisters and I loved the trip because our aunt and uncle lived on a farm. They had horses and raised cows and goats and chickens and hens and pigs. Their life style was dramatically different from our city life. And, my grandmother, who forever lived with a smile on her face, was always so happy to greet us and welcome us into her home, the house where my father grew up. But, each year, I remember vividly how difficult the trip was for my father. He was the only child of four children to leave home, go to college and have a "career" in the city. And, to make matters worse, daddy married a sophisticated city girl, which didn't help the mix with small town Ohio farmers. Rather than supported in his journey, his siblings had a difficult time forgiving daddy. But, daddy, always forgiving, took baby steps at reconciliation. Each year we returned. We galloped around on horses, milked cows, rode on tractors, cleaned out the chicken coup, ate all kinds of country fried foods, went to bed while the sun was still up and woke at dawn to help with the chores. And, in the end the family found a way to be together happily for those annual visits.

Then, one year, as a teenager, it became necessary for me, alone, to spend the summer with my father's family in Ohio. It was a particularly difficult summer and required much forgiveness and patience on my family's part. Had daddy and mother not spent years going back, returning, reuniting, working together in their differences with his mother and sister and brother in law, the family would not have been able to welcome me. More importantly, going back, trusting in God's healing strength, emboldened the family to go well beyond what they believed to be their capability. The loving act of forgiveness and reconciliation enabled me to return home to my ancestral home, to receive healing grace for the next steps in my life, for which I was and still am so very thankful.

Jacob starts the journey back. He sends messengers ahead to his long estranged brother Esau, with the hopes of winning back his favor. Now, with God's promise on his heart, that God will never desert, always keep him safe, and equip him with whatever he needs, Jacob sends his family on ahead. Alone on the banks of the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan, Jacob spends a sleepless night wrestling with a stranger who is never identified,

and yet who has redeeming power to give him strength to move forward with reconciliation.

As dawn breaks, Jacob, once again begging for a blessing, receives a new name, Israel, which leads to additional ambiguity and the birth of new possibility. Israel means, “may God show his strength, God rules, God protects,” as well as “the one who strives with God” revealing God’s promise that our God is the very source of our being, with us always, transforming us.

Jacob is never consulted about his new name, his new identity. Instead, Jacob emerges, crippled, as a reminder that victory with God is not without struggle; that our God is a God who just will not give up drawing us closer and closer, pleading and perhaps, even battling with us, to know fully the necessity of our dependence on God who promises for us undying love, grace and mercy.

Sunrise approaches and exhausted from his struggle, Jacob, limps toward camp. There on the horizon, coming toward Jacob with four hundred troops, is Esau. Jacob, solemn, tense, situates his family by order of relevance, his beloved Rachel and her son Joseph falling behind the slave girls, their children, Leah and her children. Jacob, in front of his clan, step by step, bows to his brother Esau out of reverence for the firstborn.

Esau, disregarding the formalities, running with arms outstretched, grabs Jacob, embracing him in tears of joy showering him with kisses of forgiveness.

This week, as I asked some people what forgiveness meant to them, they said some of the following: “We have to do it,” one wise gentleman reminded me...”because Jesus says so.” This same wise soul breathing a deep sigh of relief added, “forgiveness frees us up, releases our burdens, gives us the chance to be all we can be...the hardest part is, can we forgive ourselves?”

God wrestles with us, pulling us into the grace of God’s love, wounding us with God’s mercy, desiring for us to be God’s most generous and holy people, to be the heirs of God’s world, forgiving, loving and growing in God’s promise for us that we are never alone; God stands right next to us, with us, in this struggle and the next, and joyfully embraces the good news of forgiveness, asking us to do the same.

Jacob and Esau embrace reconciliation, only to part company settling in different regions as patriarchs of the nations of Israel and Edom. But, they part, holding fast to a new relationship, forgiven, made well. As the book of Genesis draws to its last chapters, the saga continues as Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph and his brothers rival. Jacob, on his death bed, blesses each of his twelve sons. The journey through Genesis opens the story for God’s pivotal saving moment in the Exodus. As is always the promise of God, from the beginning of time, by God’s design, harm is turned to good. God protects. God provides. God loves and God’s family saga continues.

May we respond to God's call to us to be God's people, loving with acts of forgiveness, because, when we do, like our friend, Jacob, who struggles and wrestles, waking and sleeping, we will see the face of God.