



## **Eastminster Worship Services**

Sunday, October 18, 2009

### **Never the Same: When the Word Changes You**

#### ***True Reconciliation***

Genesis 33:1-11

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Don't ask God to change circumstances, because God uses circumstances to change you. God's Word is filled with such stories of transformation. God speaking into the void; Adam and Eve; Noah, the ark and the animals; Abraham and Sarah having a son, Isaac; the deception displayed by Rebekah and Jacob. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You.

The power of God's Word changing people is best expressed in the words of Paul in Romans 9:1-2 and 8, "I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." And so went the Son's heart as he debated the Father in Gethsemane and forgave the thief on the cross.

If the victim does not forgive the perpetrator, the bitterness held toward the perpetrator will sap away the victim's precious life that God has given. If we do not forgive the person who has wronged us, the bitterness we hold toward that person will take away the precious life that God has given us. Bitterness destroys. We need to forgive and be forgiven.

"Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men." When Jacob had last seen Esau, twenty years earlier, Esau was determined to kill him. Knowing this, Jacob did something unthinkable: he went up against 401 men alone; with nothing to defend himself but his faith in the smiling God he met the night before. Genesis 32:30 states, "It is because I saw God face to face, and my life was

spared.”

We all face circumstances which produce terror and anxiety. And we all have learned that trusting God isn't easy. Putting our fears into God's hand is something like trying to tuck an octopus into bed. Rather than focusing on our fears, we ought to focus on our God. In order to think well about God, we need our Bibles; the Psalms, the stories of Jesus, the great truths of our faith in the Epistles or Isaiah's words of comfort. We need to work the Bible's truth into our fears like we would salve into a sore. Name the fear. Whether it is caused by the economy, unemployment, or the like, whatever the circumstance, we must put our full trust in God. He has delivered us. Stewardship is a matter of coming to terms with the truth that all we have is from God. We must give to God our tithe; the tithe of time and money. Followers of Jesus are to worship, tithe and serve.

Once our eyes are fixed on Jesus, then we can tell him every single angle on our fear or circumstance that we can identify. We should take time to truly thank God for who he is, what he's done and what he's promised! One of the wonders of God's grace is how he can give us peace in the face of terrifying things. Ours isn't a faith that believes nothing bad will ever happen, but that nothing can harm us if God has saved us.

Until Jacob saw the face of God, his fear was rooted in his inability to ask for forgiveness from God and Esau. He also did not know Esau would forgive him. To forgive is not easy, yet it is fundamental to our experience as followers of Jesus. God forgives. From a theological perspective, human sin separates humanity from the love of God. The doctrine of sin teaches us that we desire to love ourselves more. The doctrine of sin teaches us that we desire to disobey God and to do what we want to do as opposed to what God teaches us to do in the Scriptures. Putting this most succinctly, our sin perpetrates great harm on God. We make God a victim by choosing to disobey and not loving God as our creator.

Yet, in the midst of all of our sin, God continues to forgive. Even God in all of his perfection cannot allow bitterness to take up residence in his character. Bitterness toward creation would be sinful and God does not sin. But God is holy and could judge us and smite us from the face of the earth. But

God chooses not to do what we deserve and begins the process of forgiveness again and again and again. Why does God forgive? God cannot do otherwise. Why should we forgive? We should not do otherwise. Bitterness is not healthy. It is sin and bitterness saps the precious life away that God has given us. Forgiveness is essential to our health and central to the entire Christian agenda.

Esau and Jacob model forgiveness. Esau was the victim; Jacob the perpetrator. Jacob had tricked his father Isaac into giving him the birthright that was legally Esau's, because Esau was the first born. However, despite the deception, Esau lost out and Jacob became the benefactor of being the first born and he continued the promise made to Abraham that was passed on to Isaac and was now passed on to Jacob. Jacob sinned against Esau. How did Esau handle his bitterness?

The story in this chapter of Genesis is quite compelling. Notice the force of verses 1-3. This event is long after the deception. From the distance, Jacob saw his brother coming with four hundred men and he immediately divided up his children between his wives. He was afraid something was to happen. Why would Jacob be afraid unless there was something unresolved or out of sync with his brother? Jacob ran ahead and bowed to the ground seven times preparing for the worst.

Jacob must have been shocked at what took place. Instead of confrontation, Jacob received the embrace of his brother. The text states that "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept." Esau, the victim, had begun the process of forgiving his brother and Jacob received love not hate. Jacob received an embrace not a slug in the face. Jacob received mercy not judgment. This is the power of forgiveness. This is an example of the victim letting go of bitterness. The victim, Esau, took control of his situation and began the process of forgiveness. Esau didn't ask God to change circumstances, because God used circumstances to change him.

Verses 4-11 continue to display Jacob's astonishment at receiving forgiveness from Esau. Jacob had divided his family not to protect them but to give some of them to Esau. Notice the text. "Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favor with my lord.' But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.'" But Jacob continued to press

the issue. “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. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.”

Esau accepted the gift. But the gift was not what was important to Esau. Esau had forgiven Jacob.

Forgiveness allowed Esau to let go of the bitterness he had toward his brother. Jacob’s embrace, not the gift, was all that was needed. That is the power of forgiveness.

In forgiving his brother, Esau showed the face of God to Jacob. Jacob was a guilty man. He did not deserve Esau’s mercy. However, Esau had encountered God in such a way that he could do no other. Forgiving Jacob was the only thing that Esau could do. If he did not forgive Jacob, Esau would have been disobedient to God. Esau had to begin the process or the bitterness he had toward his brother would sap the very precious life away that God had given him. Forgiveness was not an option for Esau. It was the call of God. It was an issue of obedience.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. The Word asserts that God is the author of life; that sin is deadly, but God has a way out of the predicament; that there is a way for a new beginning; that God’s intent for you and me is other than we deserve; that God will accomplish incredible things through you; that God remembers you even when you forget him; that God will wipe away your fear and enable you to go through anything in life with courage; that God’s tests build your faith like nothing can; that the broken parts of your life provide the best opportunities to have an encounter with God. Don’t ask God to ask God to change circumstances, because God uses circumstances to change you.

How do we do what Esau did? How do we forgive those who have so deeply wounded us? First, we must admit that we have been wronged. This is an important step because it clarifies the issue. It doesn’t really matter what was done. What does matter is that we were wronged. Second, we forgive persons, not what they did. In other words, we forgive the one who wronged us, period. When we forgive, we copy the very presence of God.

The relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven is first and foremost one that shows the

very face of God. Like Esau, we forgive, because we want the perpetrator to know the love of God. The relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven is one of forgiving the person for what they did, not making a value judgment on who or what they are. This is the key to a forgiving relationship.

We run the risk of doing something else with the relationship then God intends when we think forgiveness is denying that what happened wasn't bad. We run the risk of doing something else with the relationship then God intends when we think forgiveness is lessening the consequences of the injustice. We do something else with the relationship then what God intends when we think forgiveness is resuming bad relationships.

Forgiveness is about acknowledging the wound and releasing the person from the wrong done. The perpetrator will never be able to erase the wrong and the wound. Forgiveness is first about the victim before it ever is about the perpetrator. This keeps us honest about forgiving the person for the act and not passing judgment on them as a person. Forgiveness is first about the victim. Forgiveness is first about the forgiver, not the forgiven. That is the clear message of the gospel.

Until the victim forgives, no matter what words the perpetrator says, those words will have no impact. If the heart of the victim has not begun to forgive, the perpetrator can never experience the power of being forgiven. Until the heart of the forgiver, the victim, is softened toward the forgiven, the perpetrator, nothing the perpetrator does will have any effect on the forgiveness process. The responsibility for forgiveness truly rests in the hands of the victim. Don't ask God to change circumstances, because God uses circumstances to change you. Let us pray!

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