

What Is Your Name? *Being Reconciled*

Genesis 33:1-15

Reading the Book of Genesis feels, to me, like sitting in the waiting room of a Center for Marriage and Family Counseling. One part of the extended family after another walks into the room, each dysfunctional and in need of help. Remember that, in the Book of Genesis, there is no nation of Israel yet. It's all about individuals and families called by God.

So, the beginning of Genesis introduces the first couple, Adam and Eve. Each has disobeyed God. Each feels ashamed and, in that shame, blames the other – and then everything else for their own failure. And, the end of Genesis takes us to Joseph and his brothers, a family that is filled with jealousy, distrust and failure – so much so, that they are willing to sell a brother into slavery.

In between, we have the families we've looked at in this series on the life of Jacob: Abraham and Sarah trying to survive by lying; struggling with many years of childlessness. We saw Isaac and Rebekah struggling with the same things – but added to the dysfunction the favoritism each shows toward a different son. And, their boys fight with one another, beginning in the womb. Their Mom was so concerned about them that she asked the Lord about their fighting. This, as you may know, led to what must have been a frightening word from God, "*Two nations are in your womb. Two peoples will be divided... (25:23).*"

And, they were divided. Jacob, the younger son, deceived his brother Esau and grabbed both his birthright and his blessing. Esau was angry, so much so that Jacob fled north to his mother's home in Haran, 3,350 miles away. The last words Esau spoke before Jacob took off were, "I will kill my brother, Jacob (27:41)."

That brings us to today's passage, Gen 33. Twenty years have passed. Both brothers have succeeded, as the world view success. They had married and had children. Each had become extremely wealthy. But, they were still divided. Jacob and his clan had broken with the part of the family in Haran and were headed back home. They had just learned that Esau and 400 soldiers were a day away.

Last week, we thought about the day and night before the confrontation of the two brothers. Jacob had sent waves of extravagant

gifts to try to appease his brother. Jacob then divided his family into two parts and sent them to the other side of the river. On the night before the day of confrontation, Jacob was alone and met God. Jacob wrestled with him all night. He left that battle wounded but blessed by God.

So, as we begin Gen 33, today is the day. Do not miss v. 1: *Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men...* Put yourselves into the shoes of Jacob and his family. How would you feel at that moment? Jacob didn't have 400 soldiers. At peace? Anxious? Angry? I'm sure most of us would be terrified.

Today's burning question: What do you do when you have a broken relationship? – with a spouse, a brother or sister, a work associate, a classmate a long-time friend...? We have already read the passage earlier in the service. You know that these two brothers take steps toward one another that day. The way I read the passage, these two brothers did not make it all the way to a perfectly reconciled relationship. At the same time, I see things in their lives that are almost always present when we, as God's people, seek to restore a broken relationship. Here's what I see in the story:

1. The Meeting with God – that is foundational. *Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared (Gen 32:30)."*

We witnessed Jacob's nighttime meeting with God last week. Without it, as I understand Jacob, he would have tried to have dealt with this only with his own wit and strength. But, after meeting God, he knows that, although God could have destroyed him, God had chosen to bless him. Jacob surely remembered the repeated promises he had received from God personally -- about God having a plan for his life and family, i.e., that God would use them to bring blessing to all peoples in the world.

And, Jacob had been humbled – as is always the case when people genuinely meet God. He had a limp coming out of that meeting, a limp that surely had taken away a lot of his personal strength – and his pride. There is no way that he alone could win this battle with Esau. He would have to depend on God.

We don't really know what happened to Esau in those 20 years since he had threatened his brother. But, through observing his conduct, I believe we see strong evidence of God being at work in his life too.

When you and I meet God, we too are always humbled. Amen? We see that we have no hope without his mercy. And, I have found, we become confident too. Genuine meetings with God begin to take us to a place in which we trust him to do what he says he will do. He will be a refuge and strength. He will be a present help in times of trouble. He will be at work in all things to bring about the good future he has promised.

So, when these brothers met, they still met as imperfect people. But, they don't launch into the blame game of saying, "You rotten brother! This is all your fault. Unless you bow down before me, I'll kill you!" No, we see something much different – and I think that what makes it different is that they had met God. I believe that the first step in restoring relationships in a God-honoring way is a fresh encounter with God. It is from honest times of wrestling with God – surrendering to God -- that we emerge seeing ourselves more clearly and longing to take steps to restore a relationship in ways that honor Him as the Lord of our lives.

We must be humble enough to admit that we have a broken relationship and need God. Even in God's chosen family, there was brokenness. To hide our need usually leads to us not dealing with it directly. A meeting with God is encouraging, life-giving and renewing. But, it is also always humbling – always!

I remembered some notes I took in a freshman counseling class years ago when I was in Bible School. I don't know who first said this – but here are the notes I took down.

A genuine Christian home in which all family members are Christians is still a place where sinners live. But, it is also a place where each member of that home has humbly admitted that they are among the sinners. We seek therefore to acknowledge our imperfect situation, to understand the underlying problems, to learn what to do about them in keeping with God's Word and then to grow together with God's help. The Christian home, then, is a place where sinful persons face the problems that all people in a sinful world face. Yet, they face them together with Jesus and all the resources God provides. We are still

sinners who live in Christian homes. But, we know the sinless Savior lives there too. That is what gives us hope. That is what makes the difference.

And, I might add: A genuine Christian church is still a church with sinners. But, we know the sinless Savior lives here too. That is what gives us hope. That is what makes the difference.

So, I believe that the first step in any call to restore a relationship is to take time to have a fresh encounter with God. Out of that encounter, you will find the humility, motivation and confidence to begin.

2. The Fear – that both protects and hinders. *Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with four hundred men; so, he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants... He himself went on ahead (33:1-3a).*

It's clear to me that, when Jacob saw Esau and his soldiers, he had some fear. So, let me tell you that fear is not always a bad thing. Fear can, of course, absolutely debilitate us and take away our joy and our strength. But, there are things that we should fear and all Southern Californians know it: like ignoring the fact that a major fire is roaring toward your home or swimming out into a riptide in the ocean – or being nonchalant when 400 soldiers are coming toward you led by a man who had threatened to kill you.

So, Jacob takes steps to protect his family in vv.1-2. Then, I appreciate the fact that the Jacob goes out personally to meet Esau and the soldiers. This is a very different Jacob from the one who was willing to sacrifice half of his entourage to save his own neck in 32:6-8.

All this is to say to you as clearly as I can that, when you know you have a broken relationship with someone, you should not simply throw caution to the wind in order to restore it. When there has been violence and abuse in the relationship, then I would never counsel you to run into harm's way simply because you think you have to. No, if you sense there that kind of broken relationship that, because of God's prompting, you need to seek to reconcile, take the kinds of precautions that provide as much safety as possible. I never counsel people to step right back into a place in which there was violence.

I don't know what I would have counseled Jacob if I had been his pastor. It wouldn't have mattered because God had appointed this

particular meeting. And, sometimes, there are encounters that are unavoidable – like this one was. So, notice that the Bible doesn't mock Jacob's precautions. There is a positive side to fear.

But, as I read the account, the reconciliation does not seem to be complete at the end. Esau wants Jacob to travel with him – but Jacob declines saying the children are too young and the animals too fragile to travel with 400 soldiers. So, Esau offers to leave some of the soldiers with him. But Jacob declines that too.

Why? In this situation, I think the hindrance may have been lingering distrust and fear. These brothers knew one another well – as we always do in our families. Jacob knew that Esau could be very quick and overly-enthusiastic in his responses – and Jacob may not have really believed that Esau's warmth would last. This kind of apprehension may have kept this first encounter from going deeper than it did.

And, in our family relationships today, I find the same kinds of things happen so often when we take those first steps toward one another. We anticipate the same old family traits recurring. We remember the anger and pain of the past – and we often have angst that the “same old things” will happen again. These kinds of things fear and distrust so often keep us from entering fully into a process reconciliation. They will have to be dealt with if the relationship will grow.

All this shows me why the meeting Jacob had with God was so foundational. Jacob knew that God had a long future for him and his family. God had told him over and over. Then, Jacob had met God personally and had not been destroyed. What could 400 men do to him? So, at the very least, Jacob took those first steps toward his brother. The only thing he really had to fear was the Lord. And, he had learned the night before that God did not want to harm him – but to bless him. So, that fact took Jacob to what we read in v. 3.

3. The Entering In – that is necessary. *Jacob bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother(33:3-4).*

What I want to emphasize here is that a broken relationship cannot even begin to be restored unless we are ready to enter in to the life of the other person. Actually, both parties need to do so. Right?

The way the Bible describes their interaction is deeply moving to me:

- Jacob bowed seven times, the thing you would only do to a king (33:3). Remember that God had given a prophecy that Esau would have to bow down to Jacob – but, even though Jacob knew that, he also knew he had wronged his brother. So, Jacob humbly bows. But, almost shockingly, Esau runs to him, embraces him, kisses him and asks about his life and family!”
- Jacob nonetheless calls Esau, “My Lord” in v.8. But, Esau will have none of that and calls Jacob, “My brother” in v.9.
- Jacob speaks of doing anything – giving any gift -- to find favor from Esau. But, Esau speaks only of God’s grace to him and that no gifts are needed. Only at Jacob’s repeated insistence does Esau accept Jacob’s gifts. In their culture, with that, their broken relationship is re-initiated.

This could not have even begun except that these two brothers actually met – and then entered meaningfully into one another’s lives. Jacob, the one about whom the Bible records most of the blame, enters in humbly, acknowledging what he had done. But, Esau has no desire to make Jacob pay for what he had done. He runs to this scoundrel of a brother – but still a brother – so that they might begin again. We see so much in all this: humility, confession, perhaps even restitution. But, the main thing I want you to see at this moment is that it all started with meeting God -- followed by actually meeting one another. Without the meeting with God, we will not have the humility and motivation to restore what is broken. Without meeting the person, we will not have opportunity to see how God can work to renew and heal what is broken.

I find v.10 to be among the most poignant in the entire Bible. Jacob said to the same brother who had threatened to kill him, “*To see your face is like seeing the face of God.*” Remember that the night before, Jacob had seen the face of God and seen that God is not here to harm but to bless. When he sees Esau, he sees the same thing. Esau through his words and actions in receiving and welcoming Jacob is reflecting the ways of God. This is what it means to glorify God: Too speak and live in such ways that people see what God is like through us.

Here’s my call to you today: If you have a broken relationship that you know needs to be restored, take time to meet with God. Out of that meeting, find a time and safe place to enter into the life of the one from

whom you are broken. Pray that when that person sees you, they will see in you're the face of God.

4. The Ongoing Work – that must continue. *That day, Esau started on his way back to Seir. Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth (33:16-17).*

The two brothers go separate ways that day. As I said earlier, Jacob seems a bit unsure – perhaps due to ongoing fear and distrust – to do live deeply and fully with his brother. The only time we hear of them coming together is in Gen 35 when they came together to bury their father. All to say – that whether they met and interacted after this meeting at Peniel, they surely had a lot of work to do. It's always that way for us. We don't fix fast, do we?

But God is a reconciling God. Now that Jesus has come, we know that reconciliation with God is possible. It is available to all – and sufficient for all. We who have received it should offer it to others. When people see us, they should increasingly see something of the face of God.

So today, don't despair if you have broken relationships. Own up to them. There is no worse problem in relational problems than to pretend you have no problems. There is not more intractable sin than to pretend you have no sins. But you must first come to the One who can forgive you, enter into your life, and provide the power to change things. With him, whatever your relationship-situation is, it is not hopeless! It's rarely easy – but it's not hopeless. Not with God by your side.

Jacob learned that truth that day at Peniel. Later, as he finally got to Canaan, he set up an altar of remembrance. He called it "El Elohe Israel" meaning, Mighty is the God of Israel (33:20). He's the God who is here today. He is the God who will go with you from this place. Even in those times in which you feel like the battle you face is like facing 400 soldiers alone, El Elohe Israel, the Mighty God, will never leave you and will do more that you could ask or imagine – to his glory.