

"You are gifted to forgive"

Genesis 33:1-11

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Third in a series on *Relationships*

Ernest Hemingway began one of his memorable short stories with the following lines:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

We could set this same story in Dallas, with the name Beth, short for Elizabeth and a paid advertisement in the *Dallas Morning News*. BETH MEET ME AT THE GALLERIA NOON MONDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN MAMA. How many hundred Beths would show up? They might have to call in the DPD.

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. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. 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." Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

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." 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. 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.

It began much like any other story of jealousy, betrayal, and estrangement. The seeds for the conflict were planted in the long-barren ground of Rebekah's womb. Isaac is sixty years old when, surprise!---Rebekah conceives twins. They both laugh. But long before the birth announcements go out, a conflict is set into motion. Jealous clouds loom on the horizon when the Lord tells Rebekah 'the older will serve the younger', a curious reversal of the usual order. Esau is born first.

The plot thickens. Mommy loved Jacob best, while Daddy favored Esau. We can already smell it--- there is going to be trouble.

Next time we see them, Jacob and Esau are strapping young men. The Lord's prediction has yet to be played out. Esau is still #1. But Jacob catches Esau in a hungry moment. When Esau comes in from the fields after a hard day's work, Jacob pulls off a shady real estate deal. Esau signs over his inheritance---his prime acreage---in exchange for a cup of hearty lamb stew.

As if stealing Esau's land isn't enough, Jacob does another unforgiveable thing. He plots to steal Isaac's blessing. He has mom bake dad's favorite lamb casserole. Jacob pulls on a wool sweater. He tries to act, feel, and smell like his brother. Old Isaac sits in his Barcalounger, his eyes dimmed by cataracts. Isaac thinks he is giving his blessing to Esau, the eldest son, his favorite, but it's really Jacob in disguise.

There was only one blessing, and only one son could get it. We have trouble relating to this ancient concept of only one blessing, but we all can relate to the power and the pain of words. The choice words that once given, can never be taken back. We all know what it is like to deceive, to shade the truth, to disguise ourselves in order to get what we want. We all know what it is like to be deceived. We all know what it is like to do or say the unforgiveable.

The stage is set for a twenty year silence. How many of us have known a long time of silence, a silence that turns those we once loved into strangers? A silence that renders people unrecognizable? A silence that we lock away in a hidden cupboard? We try to forget it was ever there. Locked away, though, it still eats at us.

Not one to stick around and wait to see what Esau will do, Jacob does what a lot of people do. He seeks a geographical cure. Jacob high tails it to northwest Mesopotamia. He marries and becomes rich. He fathers many children. His hair thins and he develops a slight paunch. Jacob's thoughts wander back to his homeland, but there's at least one little problem, his unforgiving big brother.

Jacob draws elaborate plans. He draws up what looks like a battle plan. He lines up all his men, his sheep, his women, his children. He plans it down to the last detail. He saves his dearest for last, right next to himself.

Even though we know we are supposed to forgive seventy times seven, even though we all know forgiving is the best thing to do, many of us are like Jacob: it's safer to strategize than believe we will be forgiven. We have a hard time receiving (and giving) forgiveness. We know about hedging our bets, taking out insurance. Yet on the long road toward reconciliation, we look for short cuts. We want to put flocks between 'us' and 'them'. We want an escape route.

When we approach forgiveness this way we reduce relationships to a balance sheet. We keep score. We count up rights and wrongs. We do not know forgiveness as a gift. Think about it for a minute. FORGIVENESS. Inside it we see the word GIVE. We have to GIVE it, to offer it. It is a gift we have been given by God, and it is a gift we give one another.

Like a gift, we are not always sure how it will be received. Like a gift, it might be disdained or rejected. But 9 times out of 10, probably more, that is not the case.

Like Jacob, like Paco, like Beth, we long to be forgiven; but we hoard forgiveness (as if it will run out!). We fail to give it to those most important to us. We are too proud to reconcile ourselves with the friend who turned on us. We don't want to forgive the gal who ran over our cat.

How often do we run from forgiveness? How often do we miss a glimpse of God? How many times do we expect retaliation? Sometimes our fearful expectations are fulfilled. But sometimes, like Jacob, we are surprised.

We are surprised when the impossible happens. When the thing we thought we never could forgive is lifted away from us, like a force beyond our reckoning. You hear dramatic stories of impossible forgiveness, when the maimed victim kneels with the drunk driver. When the bereaved mother forgives a murderer. When the victim reconciles with her abuser. This has to come from God! Where else could you possibly get the grace to do that?

We are surprised when the not so impossible happens, too.

When a parent's anger we thought would last into eternity finally softens. When the one we were SURE would never forgive us welcomes us back with loving arms.

We are surprised, too, by the joy that comes when we release accumulated hurt. When we finally take off our armor and lay down our

weapons, we discover the one whom we thought was waiting in ambush had been longing to forgive us almost from the start.

We are surprised by our yearning for forgiveness and our sense of coming home to ourselves when we do forgive.

The good news? We see the face of God in our estranged sister, in the one we hurt so much we cannot forget. We experience true gift when we forgive our best friend for stealing our best ideas or our best girl. We experience pure gift in our partner's forgiving embrace. We experience gift when we feel so much better than we have felt in days, or weeks, or even years. All because of the gift of forgiveness.

The good news? God's face reflects the gift of forgiveness. God's face carries the power of forgiveness, the hope for a better future. Christ is in the face of those we forgive, in those who rush to embrace us. Christ is in us, too, when we forgive, when we erase debt. God offers forgiveness we don't deserve, an end to jealousy, intrigue, and lies.

The good news? We have been created to forgive. We have been made that way. We have been gifted to forgive.

The even better news? We are forgiven. Before we even ask, God has forgiven us. God is yearning for us to know this, to accept this indescribable gift AND to SHARE IT WITH OTHERS. God expects us to pass this good news along! Christ died for the ungodly, for the sinner, for the unforgiving and the unforgiveable. That is the best news any of us will hear all day, all week, all our lives. There is nothing better. God has given us this, so we can give it to others.

Hearing the words of Jacob, "For to see your face is like seeing the face of God", we are renewed, refreshed, given hope beyond measure.

It began much like any other story of jealousy, betrayal, and estrangement. But, praise God, in the human face of forgiveness, in the face of Christ incarnate, the end is different.