

Sermon – The Face of God

Scripture Readings – Genesis 32:22-33:11, Luke 15:1-3, 11-33

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, found in Genesis 32:22-33:11, recalls the homecoming of Jacob and his reunion with his older brother Esau. Last week we read about Jacob's dream at Jacob fled for his life following the deception of Esau who sold him his birthright and his father who gave him the blessing that belonged to Esau as the first born. Twenty-one years have passed and in those years, Jacob experienced the deception of Laban, his uncle and father-in-law who tricked him into marrying Leah, the older daughter after Jacob worked seven years for the hand of Rachel, the younger daughter. Jacob worked another seven for Rachel and another seven. Jacob was now a mature, wealthy man, however going home brought back the shame of his youth and the fear of his brother. Hear now the Word of God in the Book of Genesis.

*22 The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip...*

*1 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. 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..." 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 Jacob urged Esau, and he took it.*

Both of our scripture readings this morning are stories about homecoming and forgiveness. Our second reading is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. Here we read a familiar parable about the homecoming of a young man, the dilemma of a father who loves both his sons and a father's desire for his sons to find reconciliation and forgiveness in one another. Hear now the word of God.

*1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable:*

*11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything... 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" 31 Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "*

The title of the sermon: *The Face of God*

The text: *'for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God since you have received me with such favor...' Genesis 33:10b*

Let us pray: Loving God, we thank you for welcoming each of your children home with an embrace and a kiss. May we, like Esau, reflect your face in the favor and forgiveness we offer one another. And now may the words of my mouth and meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I first heard Michael Smith's ballad "The Dutchman" sung by Steve Goodman as a young woman in Chicago. The ballad, which we heard sung this morning by a Dutchman... (Thank you Lyle and Dale) ... talks about the beauty of the Netherlands and the resilience of a relationship. It is a song about unconditional love. In the music and words we see the golden summers in Amsterdam and the banks of the ocean where the walls rise above the Zuider Zee. We also see the image of a frail, old man shuffling over cobblestoned streets along the charming canals... *till Margaret comes to take him home again through unforgiving streets that trip him.*

The lyric, *the unforgiving streets that trip him*, has stayed with me since I first heard it sung so many years ago. Somehow in this brief metaphor Smith has captured an experience common to every man and woman. I'm not sure what the unforgiving streets were in the Dutchman's life but I have learned to recognize them in my own.

If we are honest with ourselves we each walk down *unforgiving streets*, which have the potential to *trip us* time and time again by the painful memories—the feelings of hurt and bitterness that are evoked from unresolved relationships. Someone has offended us and we cannot forgive them. Because letting each other down is a part of being human these unforgiving streets can add up and lead to dead ends. Some of us have the potential of going through life never forgiving our parents for not living up to our ideal of what a mother or father should be. Likewise, some parents never forgive their children, or husbands and wives, each other.

Sometimes our unforgiving streets are in relationship to ourselves --- and these are perhaps the most dangerous. Some of us can't forgive ourselves for our bodies letting us down or for not reaching certain goals on the time lines we have created. Sometimes our unforgiving streets are related to loss...tragedy has taken someone away from us and we cannot let it go. This past week we watched the image of Dutch men and women lining the highways and bi-ways of their country, holding candles in unspeakable loss and welcoming home loved ones whose lives were senselessly taken in the horrendous plane crash over Ukraine.

Whatever the unforgiving street in our life, each one of us knows our own and how very painful they can be to travel. Therefore let us resist any response that might sound trite or superficial. There is no formula or magic to turn our unforgiving streets into gold. Jacob came face to face with this truth when he realized that he could not return home until he came face to face with Esau, his brother. Although an accomplished and wealthy man, Jacob would not come into his own until he dealt with an unresolved relationship in his childhood.

It is no coincidence that the meeting of God and his brother go hand in hand. By facing Esau, Jacob was finally facing the truth about himself, his own character. The reckoning with himself was a reckoning with God. He had to face his memories and submit to their bruising recollection. This could be ignored during busy days working for his father-in-law in a strange land but not on this lonely night prior to meeting his brother. We read: *Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

There are many things we will never know about this restless night for Jacob. With whom was he wrestling? Walter Brueggemann has this to say: *Our meeting of God and brother go hand in hand. In the Holy God there is something of an estranged brother. And in the forgiving brother there is something of the blessing of God. Jacob has seen the face of God in his struggle in the night and in the day he has seen the face of God in the embrace and acceptance of his brother Esau.*

The most surprising aspect of this story is the character of Esau. We don't read much more about him in Scripture because the birthright was passed on through Jacob, which is now Israel. Isn't it paradoxical that the brother who reflects the face of God in his graciousness, in his ability to forgive, is not one of the covenant children of Israel. Esau's descendants became the Edomites.

When Jacob left 21 years earlier Esau hated Jacob and justly so. Something happened to Esau in the interim as well. He traveled down his own unforgiving streets and resolved his feelings toward his scheming brother. Rather than hang on to his bitterness, he not only forgave his brother for deceiving him, but he must have forgiven himself as well for the foolishness, the rashness of his youth in selling his birthright for a cup of portage. Rather than wanting to harm Jacob, we read: *Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.*

This description of Jacob's homecoming and reconciliation with Esau is almost verbatim the words Jesus chooses in his parable to describe the younger son's homecoming and reconciliation with his father. *But while he was yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran to him and embraced him, and kissed him.*

Placing these two stories of homecoming and reconciliation side by side deepens the meaning of Jesus' parable, how God longs for us as God's children to forgive and embrace each other and so reflect the face of God. When the Father gets word that the older son is angry and refuses to come in, he also goes out to entreat him. Because the Father understands his firstborn's point of view, he listens to his feelings of anger and bitterness, and then, he gently reminds his son that all they have shared over the years is something no one can take away from them---not even his younger brother. Finally he explains that to love the younger brother and rejoice at his return does not negate the love he has for his first born. And so we find in this parable a profound understanding about the nature of God. This is not about a God who shows favoritism and elitism. This is about a Father who loves both his children.

And this, my friends, is a celebration for the whole family of God. We no longer need to seek being the favored son or daughter. Our religion need not be elitist. In fact, this is the antithesis of who our God has been revealed to be in Jesus Christ. Each of us has a place in our Creator's heart. We are all God's favorites! There is no longer one birthright but many blessings.

And nothing would be more pleasing to our God than a greater wideness in our mercy toward one another; that we might embrace our brothers and sisters who also belong to God. When we are able to forgive, to our surprise and delight we recognize that it is indeed the grace of God, the reflection of God within us that makes it possible.

*For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.*

Jesus' parable leaves open the question of whether the older son will join the celebration. May we be people who do not stop short in our unforgiving streets but who continue down the roads that lead to a celebration and seeing the face of God in unexpected places:

In the Esaus,  
in the loving hands of the Father which embrace both sons,  
and in the face of a carpenter,  
who welcomed and ate with tax collectors and sinners and who was crucified between two  
thieves for you and me.

May we go forth in peace, forgiving ourselves and one other. Amen.