

Sermon – The Face of God

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

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Our first reading, found in Genesis 32:22-33:11, recalls the homecoming of Jacob and his reunion with his older brother Esau. Twenty-one years had passed since Jacob deceived Esau into selling him his birthright and their father Jacob into giving him the blessing that belonged to Esau as the first born. Jacob is now a mature, wealthy man; however, going home brought back the shame of his youth and the fear of his brother. Jacob feared revenge but instead found favor and forgiveness. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*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. Amen.*

Both of our scripture readings are stories about homecoming and forgiveness. Our second is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, where we read a familiar parable about the homecoming of a younger son. Jesus shares the rituals and celebrations that follow and the dilemma of his overjoyed father who loves both his sons and who longs for them to find reconciliation and forgiveness in one another. Listen to what the spirit is saying:

*1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So Jesus 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 yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran to him and embraced 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 servants, "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 servants 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 servant 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." Amen.

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, thank you for welcoming 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 the meditations of each of our hearts 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. Welcoming my Dutch mother into our home these last few years has reminded me of the richness of this ballad which we heard sung this morning by a Dutchman... (Thank you Lyle VanDeventer). The ballad 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 an older, fragile Dutchman shuffling over cobblestoned streets along the charming canals...until his beloved wife Margaret *comes to take him home again through unforgiving streets that trip him.*

The lyric, *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 captures 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 they evoke. 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. We cannot forgive ourselves for mistakes in the past or perceived weaknesses.

Whatever the unforgiving street may be, each one of us knows our own, and how very painful they are to travel. So let us resist any trite or superficial response. There is no formula or magic to turn our unforgiving streets into gold. Jacob came face to face with this truth when he realized he could not return home without coming face to face with his brother Esau. 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 the meeting of his brother go hand in hand. In Esau's presence, Jacob is confronted with the truth about himself, his character, and what he did. 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 seeing Esau. We read: *Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

Theologian Walter Brueggemann believes: *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 dynamic within this story is the character of Esau. We don't read about his journey in the Hebrew Scriptures because the birthright was passed to Jacob who becomes Israel. What a delightful paradox that the brother who reflects the face of God in his graciousness, in his ability to forgive, is outside the covenant community of Israel. Esau's descendants became the Edomites.

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

Jacob's homecoming and reconciliation with Esau is almost verbatim to the homecoming of the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal. *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 accentuates the meaning of Jesus' parable and how God longs for us to forgive and embrace each other and so reflect the face of God.

In Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* our understanding of this parable is enriched by the thoughtful reflection of one Dutch pastor on the artistic work of another Dutch painter. Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest from the Netherlands explores Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son, a painting that led Nouwen on his own spiritual journey and homecoming.

This painting can be found at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia and was created at the end of Rembrandt's life, in the late seventeenth century, following many of his own tragic losses. In the painting, this Dutchman captures the nature of God's compassion in the hands that embrace both sons.

The hands are quite different according to Nouwen. One is strong, muscular, and firm. The other is refined, soft, and tender. Rembrandt conveys that the embrace of a loving omnipotent God is both masculine and feminine. In these patriarchal stories of grace and reconciliation, we are reminded that the face and hands of God transcend gender and welcome all.

When the Father gets word that the older son is angry and refuses to come in, he comes out and meets him where he is. Because the Father understands his firstborn's point of view, he listens, and then, gently reminds him that all they have shared through 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. This is about a Father who loves all 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. There is no longer one birthright but many blessings.

And nothing would be more pleasing to God than a greater wideness in our mercy toward one another. 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.