

My Brother's Keeper, Pt. 2

Genesis 32:3-12; Genesis 33:1-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Ok, on to part two of our two-week focus on Jacob and Esau. We're going to pick up the story where we left off last week in a bit. But I want to begin with an article that I came across on Friday morning.

The topic of the article was a website that has proven to be quite popular over the last decade or so.

I'm going to call the website "Am I the Idiot?" Its real title has a less flattering designation than "Idiot."

(It starts with an "A," you can use your imagination. But I decided that this probably wouldn't be appropriate for a sermon.)

Anyway, according to the article, this is what "Am I the Idiot" is about:

Its stated purpose is "to assign blame". Anonymous posters describe the tortuous ins and outs of disputes with loved ones, friends or co-workers, soliciting judgement from strangers. Readers gleefully weigh in with "YTI" (you're the idiot), "NTI" (not the idiot), "NIH" (no idiots here), or "ESH" (everyone sucks here). Those browsing are encouraged to upvote responses they like.

Well, an entire website devoted to judging the behaviour of strangers and reducing moral evaluations to a popularity contest? What could possibly go wrong?

Not surprisingly, the website is enormously popular. It has over nine million subscribers, which, in my opinion is simultaneously depressing and telling.

We humans seem to *love* to render judgment.

The article goes on to say this:

Most of the conflicts described on [Am I the Idiot?] are no less ferocious for being deeply trivial. As I write this, the stories at the top of the page include a man who told his wife on their wedding day that her make-up looked weird; someone who refuses to eat any food his cousin makes for him because she once tricked him into eating cottage cheese; and a husband who unfolded all the clothes his wife had just folded for him, because she hadn't rolled them the way he likes it. (At the moment, the dominant verdicts are YTI, YTI, and YTI respectively.)

The site is sometimes touted as a tool for "conflict resolution", partly on the basis that those who receive a YTI judgement sometimes come back to explain how much they have supposedly learnt from the process. As a profile of the site from 2020 put it: "It's a place where accountability actually exists... It's also a place for growth." It's really not, though. It's a place where people get to feel good about themselves by judging and scolding others. It's great fun, but nobody here is going to get a Nobel Peace Prize.

I thought about Am I the Idiot as I reread the story of Jacob and Esau this week.

As is probably clear from last Sunday's sermon, I think if we were to subject the exploits of Jacob and Esau and their broader family to the judgements of a forum like "Am I the Idiot," we could well end up with an "Everybody Sucks Here" judgment.

Last Sunday we left off the story with Esau ready to murder Jacob for stealing both his birthright and his father's blessing, and their mother Rachel whisking Jacob off to Uncle Laban's place (way up north in modern day Syria) to give his brother a bit of time to cool off.

There's manipulation and deception and favouritism at every turn.

Well, "a bit of time" with Uncle Laban becomes a few decades. In the intervening time there's plenty more uninspiring behaviour.

Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine when Uncle Laban tricks him into working fourteen years for both of his daughters (seven years for Leah, seven for Rachel, whom Jacob wanted in the first place).

(As an aside, the way in which women and daughters were bartered and bought and sold used would also fall into the “Everybody Sucks Here” category.)

Leah, who knows very well that she is Jacob’s second choice, ends up being blessed with a bunch of sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun—and one daughter (Dinah, who is later the victim of a rape for which her brothers exact gruesome vengeance, see Genesis 34).

Rachel is angry because she remains childless, so she offers her slave girl Bilhah to Jacob, and she gives birth to two more sons, Dan and Naphtali.

Leah gets annoyed because of this (and because her womb suddenly seems closed) and so she offers *her* slave girl Zilpah to Jacob, and she gives birth to Dan and Asher.

For those keeping score, that’s now ten sons and one daughter to three women, two of whom had no choice in the matter.

Rachel finally conceives and gives birth to the remaining two sons who will comprise the twelve tribes of Israel. First, Joseph and then Benjamin, who she dies giving birth to.

Jacob, for this part, seems perfectly happy to sleep with whatever combination of wives and slave girls are put before him.

He also resumes his hustling ways, coming up with some creative breeding techniques to prosper his flock of sheep at the expense of Uncle Laban’s (revenge for the fourteen years?). If you want more details, see Genesis 30.

Laban’s sons get angry at Jacob for getting rich at their family’s expense. Jacob suddenly gets the impression that “Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before” (I wonder why?).

Jacob takes off and begins to head back south to Canaan, without even giving Uncle Laban a chance to say goodbye to his daughters and their families. Laban takes off after Jacob and after catching up with him, they come to a rather grudging agreement to part ways.

This sets the scene for our readings this morning. Jacob is on his way home, fabulously wealthy, but having burned a few more bridges, and with a huge family produced by way of no small amount of conflict and rivalry and jealousy.

And he's nervous about the welcome he might receive from Esau. He hopes two decades are enough for his brother to cool off, but he's not sure.

This is obvious by the way he tries to appease him. He tries to bribe his way to Esau's favour by sending some messengers ahead with the promise oxen, donkeys, flocks, and slaves.

The news he hears in response isn't promising. Esau is coming to meet him but he's not alone. He has four hundred men, and four hundred men usually means someone's getting ready for war.

Jacob decides to split his company up into two groups. One might survive the coming onslaught. He offers one last desperate prayer to God and braces himself for what's coming.

And then... Genesis 33:4 gives Jacob (and the reader) a shock.

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

There is no explanation offered for Esau's change of heart. Perhaps time really does heal all wounds. Perhaps Esau forgave Jacob from the depths of his heart. Perhaps it was little more than calculating pragmatism (it's cheaper not to go to war, and they both had a lot to lose). We don't really know.

All we have is this scene of two brothers who had become enemies embracing and starting anew on a different path.

Jacob talks Esau into accepting his gifts (Esau is reluctant to do so as he already had enough). And the brothers make peace. We don't know the specifics, but something changes when they come together.

But it also seems that at least a little bit of suspicion and distance remain. Esau wants Jacob to travel with him to Mt. Seir, but Jacob makes excuses and lies. He says he'll come later, but he doesn't. He ends up going to Succoth instead.

The brothers go their separate ways and live their separate lives. Not enemies anymore but not exactly friends either.

The next time the brothers meet it's at the burial of their father in Hebron. That's all we know.

It's not exactly a template for forgiveness and reconciliation but it's better than nothing. Sometimes, in world of people behaving badly, this is all we get.

Well, from ancient Israel to our time. I want to tell a story from a recent Monday at the jail.

A young man put his hand up during bible study one week. "You know that bible verse that talks about the greatest three things, or whatever... you know, the three things that remain and how the best one is love?"

He had this wild look about him, hair everywhere, restless movements, a frantic, searching gaze, cuts on his hands. One was still bleeding. He got up now and then to go tear a few strips off the toilet paper roll on the bookshelf to slow the flow.

"Yeah, that's 1 Corinthians 13," I said. "It's one of my favourites." "Yeah, I read it last night," he said. "I like it, too. But he's missing one. There's a fourth one that should be in there."

"What's the fourth one?", I asked. He pauses the frantic movements for a minute, looks straight at me with unsettling intensity, and said: "forgiveness."

"Tell me more," I said.

He paused again, before going on. "Well, you know, I think if you don't have forgiveness then love and hope are impossible... and maybe even faith, I don't know. It kind of weaves through all of them. And you know, I've done some bad stuff, and, well, you know God's forgiveness never runs out, right? Like, no limits, he'll always forgive you."

I felt a bit uneasy about saying “no limits” to a room full of men that hardly needed a blank check to go out do more bad stuff, assured of their forgiveness.

But what could I say?

Jesus did say “seventy-times seven,” didn’t he (Mat. 18:22)?

Jesus did say, “If you do not forgive you will not be forgiven,” didn’t he (Mat. 6:15)?

Jesus did say, “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little,” didn’t he (Luke 7:47)?

I think my young friend was right. This side of eternity, faith, hope, love... and I would add “peace,” are impossible without forgiveness.

To be human is to fall short. We do things and we leave things undone. We make mistakes. We hurt people and are hurt by them.

We blunder foolishly down predictable paths. We forget what needs remembering and remember that which we would do better to forget.

We chase after small and stupid gods and ignore the One who made us, loves us and has called us.

We need to be forgiven. Each one of us. We need to know that the wrong that we have done can finally be acknowledge, overcome, healed, redeemed.

Forgiveness is a gift, and it is a burden. It is deliberate bearing of the weakness and wrongdoing of one another.

It is to unclench righteous fists, to release instinctive reactions (particularly when we’re convinced they’re justified!). It is to offer one another the ability to be what we are.

Fallen, selfish human beings who hurt each other.

Frail, weak human beings who carry around silent pain that they don’t know what to do with.

Angry, confused human beings who lash out and flail around in the face of problems too big to solve.

Precious, beautiful human beings who long for more and for better but don’t always know how to get there.

Dearly loved idiots, we might summarize. ☺

Forgiveness meets us as human beings where we are, as we are, and it stubbornly, honestly, and relentlessly loves us forward. It is the thing we need.

And it is the thing we need to extend to others. Probably more than we can even know.

Last Sunday, I noted a parallel between the story of the warring brothers Jacob and Esau and the two lost sons of Jesus' parable in Luke 15.

I talked about how the story Jesus tells is full of characters every bit as disappointing as Jacob and Esau, and about how it is the grace and the mercy of God that steps into the middle of the mess with a grace that is greater than all our sin.

I couldn't help but notice another parallel between the two stories this week.

Jacob returns to Canaan expecting the worst. He's not down and out like the younger son. He's not down to his last penny and eating pig food or anything. He's filthy rich.

But like the younger son in Jesus' story, he's made a mess of his relationships. And he's coming home far from certain of just what kind of welcome he'll find.

Like the younger son, he has his speech rehearsed. It's not, "just let me be a slave." It's more like, "here's a bunch of stuff, please don't kill me."

Both Jacob and the younger son are trying to manage the situation to save their own skin.

And in both cases, they encounter a surprise.

In the story of the lost son, the father is waiting at the gate.

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 (Luke 15:20).

What follows is the party of a lifetime for the son who made his way home.

In Jacob's case, Esau isn't waiting at a gate. He meets him on the road.

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Genesis 33:4).

There's no party in the aftermath of this meeting. There's a kind of wary parting of ways.

But in both cases, self-justification and sin management meet a surprising mercy that changes the story entirely.

And this, Jesus says, is God's disposition toward us. This is the best news of all.

I'm guessing that each one of us in this room is part of a story that could use some surprising mercy.

Maybe it's a difficult relationship. Maybe it's a long-festering grievance. Maybe it's a weary history of score-keeping that needs to be wiped clean. Maybe it's a situation where you've been saying to yourself, "Well, maybe, but they have to make the first move."

Maybe it's a narrative in your own head. Sometimes the hardest people to be merciful to are ourselves.

I don't know what your specific situation is. But I do know that it is mercy that changes the story.

It did for Jacob and Esau. It did for the younger son in Jesus' parable (the older son? who knows?). And it can do the same for each one of us.

May God help us to be people of mercy. And in so doing, to be people of peace.

Amen.

