

The last time we saw Jacob he was running toward Haran, running for his life, with his brother Esau's threats still ringing in his ears, "Jacob, I'll kill you!" Jacob, we will recall, had just played the deceiver and stolen his brother's blessing right out from under his blind father's eyes, even as he had his birthright when they were younger. Esau had good reason to be angry and Jacob knew it, so he ran.

In the ensuing chapters of Genesis we don't hear much about Esau, but we follow Jacob back to Haran to find a wife, which he does, in fact he finds two of them, Leah and Rachel. Along the way he has an encounter with God as he watches angels ascend and descend a ladder which stretches from earth to heaven. Oscar spoke of that vision last week, so suffice it to say today, the Lord is with Jacob.

I think these stories in Genesis are among some of the most engaging and enjoyable in all of Scripture. They are wonderful to hear and wonderful to tell. When Jacob arrives in Haran he immediately meets the beautiful Rachel who just happens to be the daughter of his mother's brother, Laban. They fall in love and Jacob agrees to work for seven years to have Rachel's hand in marriage, which he gladly does, only to discover on his wedding night that the deceiver has been deceived by his father in law. The woman he has married is Leah, the older sister, the one with the dull eyes, so he agrees to work another seven years for Rachel.

During those years God continues to bless Jacob with children, ten sons and a daughter to Leah and her maidservants, but Rachel is barren, until she conceives and gives birth first to Joseph, who becomes Jacob's favorite child, and later to Benjamin, the child of his old age. God also blesses both Jacob and Laban with many flocks such that both become very wealthy men, and eventually Jacob realizes it is time to go back home, back to the land of Canaan, back to the land which God had promised to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac and now to him and his off-spring, but there is only one problem – Esau. The last words he heard his brother say were, "Jacob, I'll kill you", and as far as he was aware nothing of that had changed.

Lewis Smedes, in his book *"Forgive and Forget"*, writes of the process of forgiveness, and here we find Esau demonstrating the first two stages: Hurt and Hatred, and rightly so, he has been deeply wronged. What we don't yet know at this point in the story is whether he has moved beyond his hurt and hatred to the final two stages of Healing and Coming Together, hence the drama of the story.

So as Jacob nears home he sends messengers ahead to scout things out and he is terrified when they return saying that Esau is coming to greet him with 400 men. All indicators suggest that there has not been a whole lot of forgiving and forgetting on Esau's part. So Jacob goes in to defense mode. First, he divides his family and flocks and herds into two companies, no doubt the Leah side and the Rachel side, assuming that if Esau attacks one, the others will escape. Then he prays to God, reminding Him of His promises and asking for His deliverance. Isn't it interesting how often we remind God of His goodness and faithfulness, particularly when we need God to be good and faithful to us?

So that night Jacob has a restless night's sleep. All night long he wrestles with a mysterious messenger from the Lord and neither of them can prevail over the other, until just before daybreak when the angel touches Jacob on the hip, dislocating the joint. But before letting him go, Jacob asks him to bless him. We read, *"The man said, 'What is your name?'" "Jacob" he answered. And the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and prevailed."*

Two things happen in this encounter with God. First, his name is changed. Jacob has been given a new identity. Second, forever after he would walk with a limp. We don't walk away from an encounter with God unchanged.

This encounter with God is the prelude to the encounter he would have with his brother the next day and here we witness one of the most moving scenes in all of Scripture.

We are told, *"Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau and the four hundred men coming toward him. So he divided the children between Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah and her children, then Rachel and Joseph last of all. Then Jacob went ahead of all of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times as he came near his brother."* After 20 years of separation, 20 years in which the hurt and hatred, the bitterness and the desire for revenge had opportunity to harden and grow, he came before his brother asking for forgiveness, hoping for the best, expecting the worst. Whenever we ask forgiveness from someone we have hurt or wronged we do so with great risk, with a sense of fear and trembling. Will they accept us and our apology, or reject us? Will this be the ending of a friendship or the new beginning of a restored relationship? We don't know, we can't know.

There is no guarantee that our apology, our confession, will prompt their forgiveness. All we can know for certain is that we must do our part in asking for forgiveness if the relationship is ever going to be restored.

So, with great apprehension, Jacob approaches his brother, come what may. And we read, "*Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.*" Of course they wept! Who wouldn't? This was the moment of confession and forgiveness, the act of reconciliation. Beyond the stages of hurt and hatred Esau had moved on to healing and the two brothers coming together again.

Be assured, there is a difference between forgiving and forgetting. Forgetting is an act of the memory, but forgiving is an act of the will, of the heart; it is an expression of love. You don't have to forgive someone for something you've forgotten about. You've forgotten about it, so there is nothing to forgive; there is no burden of hurt being carried. But surely Esau had not forgotten anything that Jacob had done to him, how could he? So what we are witnessing here is an act of forgiveness. Forgiveness means "I remember the hurt or the harm that you caused me, but I no longer hold it against you. I have let that go. I have set you free."

This is what Esau did for Jacob, and Jacob's only response to his brother's magnificent, magnanimous act of mercy is to say, "*to see your face is like seeing the face of God.*" Friends, when we forgive we are being God-like, we are acting the part of God to another.

This scene is reminiscent of another told by Victor Hugo in his epic tale, "*Les Miserable.*" I consider it one of the most moving and beautiful passages in all of literature. You know the story. The prisoner has been set free after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving children. We know him only as prisoner #24601. Back on the streets, he is rebuffed and rejected by everyone he meets as he seeks food and shelter, until he finally comes to the home of the Bishop who welcomes him even as he learns of his past. The Bishop even goes so far as to call the prisoner "brother" and then calls him, not by his number, but by his name, Jean Valjean. As they sit at the table that evening the Bishop makes a point to use his finest silver, the only thing of value the Bishop owns, and that night Jean Valjean seizes the opportunity, steals the silver and rushes out into night. Before dawn he is arrested and is brought back to the Bishop's house where he knows he will be condemned and sent back to prison. But to his surprise, disbelief really, the Bishop assures the arresting officers that the silver had indeed been a gift to the man in their custody and that he really should be set free. He even goes so far as to chastise the thief for not taking the most valuable pieces, the silver candlesticks, and offers them as well. As the officers leave, the Bishop looks intently into his eyes and says, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and give it to God!" In the musical, the Bishop's words are summarized in this way, "Jean Valjean, I have bought your soul for God!" The price has been paid, the sin is forgiven and Jean Valjean has been set free!

I will not try to summarize a four hour musical or a 1500 page novel that took me seven years to read, but this is the moment in which Prisoner #24601 is given his life back. He is given a name, a promise, a hope and a future. There is sweet freedom in forgiveness and Jean Valjean takes full advantage of it. He "pays forward" the Bishop's act of mercy and forgiveness into every other person who touches his life from that moment on, including his foil, Inspector Javert, who in the end does not know how to deal with the grace and mercy Valjean extends to him.

There is a sweet freedom in forgiveness that is life-giving. The Psalmist David speaks of it in Psalm 32 as he remembers the burden and brokenness he felt in his body and soul before and until he openly confessed his sin and asked for God's forgiveness. He writes, "*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.*" We know that same burden and brokenness in our own bodies and souls when we have a sin that needs to be confessed, or a wrong that needs to be forgiven, by God or another. This spiritual dynamic has physical and emotional implications for us. Yet we also know the sweet relief of forgiveness, as the Psalmist writes, "*Then I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*" Ah, the sweet freedom of forgiveness.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Gospel: God's great forgiveness of us. Just as the Bishop bought Jean Valjean's soul for God, so Jesus Christ has done the same for us. In I Corinthians 6 the Apostle Paul writes, "*You were bought with a price*". Jesus paid the penalty of our sin and by His forgiveness He has set us free, so we know longer belong to ourselves, we belong to Him. Friends, we have been set free to live for Him.

This then becomes the model of our relationships with one another. As Lewis Smedes writes, “Forgiveness is God’s intention for coming to terms with a world in which, despite their best intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply. He began by forgiving us and He invites us all to forgive one another.” We are called to be forgivers exactly because we have been forgiven. So we read in Colossians 3, “*Forgive one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you.*”

At the end of the Jacob story, our lesson for today, God renews the covenant with Jacob that He had previously made with Abraham and Isaac – the promise of land and offspring and blessing. Did Jacob deserve any of these blessings? No, not anymore than he deserved his brother’s forgiveness, but they were graciously given to him and in that forgiveness he was set free to be the blessing God intended him to be, the father of many nations, the Children of Israel.

Friends, these are the stories of our faith, but they are also the stories of our lives. This is what Jesus Christ has done for us. He has paid the penalty of our sins and bought our souls for God. You are no longer your own, you belong to God. Since then we have been forgiven in this way, we also are called to be forgivers of others in this way.

There is a whole lot of forgiving that needs to be going on: God of us, us of others, others of us, us of ourselves. Oh, the burdens we carry when we cannot forgive or feel ourselves forgiven; but, oh, the sweet freedom of forgiveness.

When we forgive another we play the part of God and set them free.

When we are forgiven by another we see the very face of God.