

**“Our Money Story - Restore”**  
**Genesis 33:1-17; John 21:1-19**  
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**21st Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 25, 2020**

Every year at stewardship season, I lose sleep over the budget. I've tried not to, but I do, because every year for the past 7-8 we come up a little short which means I have to face telling committee chairs and staff to cut back and/or the Session takes a little more from our endowment which our financial people tell us is not sustainable. And I lose sleep because I feel partly responsible for fixing it.

Fixing it has basically meant one of three choices. We raise more money, cut back our spending, or take a little more from the endowment, a little more than we should if we want it to remain over the long haul. We could probably embrace any of these 3 as workable if we were all of the same mind. But we're not. And as a result, we end up with tensions that can't be resolved. Some who think we need to push harder get people to give more - if we just tithed we'd have more than enough! Others who emphasize that we need to "live within our means." Still others who point out that we're always so afraid of endowment spending, yet the thing has been growing for 20 years from interest and new gifts, despite our scarcity mentality.

As a result, I lose sleep over the budget. Over what's good and right.

Recently, I've decided to accept this predicament rather than try to fix it. Partly because, well, I need my sleep. But mostly because accepting the reality that our money story together is not going to resolve itself so easily might actually be our spiritual work. The spiritual work of accepting that none of us is going to win our perspective, none of us is going to get our way. Our future is not going to work out exactly the way we want it to because, well, we've all got to deal with each other.

Esau and Jacob finally seem to come to a similar conclusion. We've got to deal with each other which means restoring the relationship, they decide. And, on its face, this story has every bit of a Hallmark reconciliation drama - twins, at odds with each other from the very beginning, who find themselves weeping and bowing, and embracing one another, finally burying the hatchet. In an elaborate ritual of reconciliation, they seem to find it here. This is what we need to find in life, the text suggests. Reconciliation. Or in the words of today's stewardship theme, restoration.

But that's not happening here with Esau and Jacob. For one thing, neither party seems particularly at ease in this entire interaction. Esau has 400 men with him which sounds more like an army than a family reunion. Jacob responds by using his least favorite wife, children, and maids as human shields, to protect his most favored family members in case things turn ugly. Prior to all this Jacob has sent 3 waves of

extravagant gifts to Esau maybe to show his loving intent, or maybe to signal to his brother, I'm rich and powerful so don't mess with me.

"But Esau ran to meet *him*," *the text says*, "*and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.*" Here is the tear jerker climax of a scene, you might think, except that "falling on someone's neck" might actually be "bit his neck." One of the early rabbinic interpreters suggested that Esau's kiss was treacherous. In the text there are offers of more gifts which could also sound like posturing and flaunting power, plus awkward negotiations about whether the two should travel together or separately.<sup>1</sup> Then, finally, after what a seems like agreement to accompany each other to the next town, Jacob goes somewhere else.

Some restoration. It's really disappointing as a preacher to find all this out about the text. I'd prefer a reconciliation scene that lets me draw from my deep well of pure reconciliation stories that I've used in the past. You know, the mother of the child who is murdered, reconciling with her son's murderer. The children abandoned by their parent only to find each other again in a tear-stained Hollywood scene. Those pure reconciliation stories are the ones that we love to tell because they are so clear and so clean.

But a lot of our stories are more like Esau and Jacob. Two siblings who can't ever really go back and restore a relationship because there wasn't really one there to begin with. Their relationship of competition started out in the womb, according to the story - a division so deep that there is no going back to restore what was. There is only going forward to see if they can create something in the future that might yet be.

A lot of the country right now is kind of obsessed with trying to get back and restoring stuff. "Build back better," on the Democrat side has some similar overtones to "make America great again" on the Republic side - both make reference to the past as a kind of anchoring place. But what if those anchoring places, tether us to possibilities that aren't real possibilities at all? What if instead of anchoring ourselves to some past, we latched onto a future possibility that we haven't yet experienced together?

In our staff devotion this week, Michael Britt pointed out that, living in a city with lots of historic architecture, when we hear the word, "restore," we think of putting things back the way they were - in their ideal state. But Esau and Jacob can't do that.

Jacob and Esau both seem bound to some impossible idea from their own past that they are supposed to be best buds - that's what brothers are, after all. And yet what seems most significant on this day of their detente, is not their meeting itself, but what takes place after it. Each seems to move on in different directions. Jacob goes a different way and Esau doesn't try to pursue him. It's like they both are freed finally not

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this section is informed from my memory of an excellent interreligious study dialogue at the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies. I did locate some similar online resources documenting much of my memory. See Prof. Albert I. Baumgarten, "Why is Esau's Kiss Dotted?" <https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-is-esaus-kiss-dotted>

simply from a frayed relationship - but from the expectations they had both followed of what that relationship needed to be.

The only thing that I can see that is restored, is their recognition that the old script has been put to rest. What lies ahead now is the opportunity to write a new story. And that must be a terribly frightening place to be. Because this non-existent relationship has governed both of their entire lives to this point. The division between them has ruled their existence, governed their choices, inflamed their fears, shaped their stories more than any other force until this moment in time. If anything is restored it is their own agency, the reality that from here on out their choices are their own to make.

It's a frightening thing to realize that whatever story has governed your life around money - whatever value you have attached to it through the years; maybe you've never felt like there was enough so you had to suppress every desire, postpone every want; or maybe you needed to spend, spend, spent to feel better in some numbing exercise that has never silenced your pain; maybe you absorbed the idea that money was the taboo topic that you could never face and handle so you let it handle you; or maybe money is the marker that you wore like tattoo on your arm - an identity you wanted to advertise to others and to yourself - whatever that story, it's a frightening thing when you realize you have been freed from it. You get to choose which story you will write. At the end of the day, you are accountable for your own money story.

And we are accountable for the money story that we write, together, about our congregation. I'm still not sure what that story will be. I just know that none of the choices that I've heard offered through the years really fit us well. Such as we're a "rich church." Okay, we have some wealthy members, yes, and those who have passed along their wealth to us and to those who will come after and we break bread with those who have experienced foreclosure and unemployment and have been paycheck to paycheck for their entire lives. Or that old money story that the church used to give half of its budget to benevolences. It sure did and the city had  $\frac{1}{3}$  more of its population and the wealth of the church was so great that its pastor apparently lived in a church house with servants. We can't go back to these stories. We need to go forward into a future we haven't yet experienced, with a story that we write together.

Peter faced the same uncertainty. Following his awful denial of Jesus, you can see why he would want to return to the beach, go back to the roots of his early years and do some fishing. That's often where we go when our worlds are upended. We go back to what is familiar. But Jesus points him to a braver place - to a healed future where the past is past and Peter has an opportunity to write a new story - not marked by fear, not captive to sins of his past, but released from them. Freed to serve and give and love and live for others which is the story that Peter has always wanted to write.

That's the gift that Jesus gives to Peter on the beach. The gift that I believe God wants to give to every single one of us. The gift not to be defined entirely by the past.

To remember it and understand its mark, yes, but only so he can be freed to live differently in the future. To have our own sense of agency restored which is what happens when God heals us. There is nothing stopping us from living into the joy of letting our lives speak the way God intends. There is abundance all around.

I think this may be why I lose sleep every year. It's not really about the budget. It's the choices that the budget brings into our focus. The reality that stewardship is always about way more than money. It's about how you're going to spend your money, yes; how we're going to spend our money together, but it's about way more than that. Restored to serve and give and love and live for others, how are you going to spend your life? How are we going to spend our lives together?