

Brothers
Genesis 32:3-8, 33:1-11
for Westminster Presbyterian Church
26 July 2026

Our second text comes from Genesis, chapter 32, verses three through eight and chapter 33, verses one through eleven. Listen for the word of the Lord.

³ Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my **lord** Esau: Thus says your **servant** Jacob, ‘I have lived with Laban as an alien and stayed until now, ⁵ and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves, and I have sent to tell my **lord**, in order that I may find **favor** in your sight.’”

⁶ The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” ⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed, and he divided the people who were with him and the flocks and herds and camels into two companies, ⁸ thinking, “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.”

... 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. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. 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.” ⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. 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 he urged him, and he took it.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I have a sneaking suspicion, a small voice in my only-child head, that believes siblings are the problem. I’m not trying to buy into stereotypes that suggest we “onlies” are the center of the world, only to engage in a thought project: what if Joseph could have an amazing technicolor dream coat and *not* get sold into Egyptian slavery for it? Imagine the bounty of Cain’s offerings without showboat Abel! Would we have world peace if Ishmael received his due and stayed with his mother in Abraham’s camp?

Or consider our three, surely not unlike children you might know, a set of 14 year old twins and their 17 year old older sister. They have come to the age where they can no longer be convinced that sharing is caring. Much dinnertime conversation is spent arguing over resource allocation. I've seen each of them at various points during the day imagine a world where they received the full lot of attention, funds, and food. Not a'one of them seem too bothered by the prospect.

Which brings me back to my original proposal: perhaps siblings are the problem.

They certainly were for Jacob, who was a turn away from being first born. Jacob saw it fit to hold his brother's food hostage in return for Esau's birthright and then he had the audacity to trick his dying father into offering him the blessing. Jacob's brother was *the* fundamental problem of his life, an obstacle to be overcome.

By the time we arrive to the text I read this morning, Jacob has lived away from home for twenty years. The last thing anyone heard from Esau was the final verse of the text David read a moment ago: "I will kill my brother Jacob."

In the intervening period, Jacob has amassed a fortune: two wives, a bevy of children, concubines, dry goods, and innumerable flocks. After twenty years serving his father-in-law, Jacob is released. It's time for him to return to the land God promised. But Esau looms, threatening everything Jacob built.

It's easy to imagine that Esau's animosity grew while Jacob prospered. Surely Jacob thought so — no wonder he was "greatly afraid and distressed" when he receives word that his brother travels toward him with a regiment of 400 men.

Jacob is acutely aware that the edge of the promise may be his deserved end. A slow burn, a final chapter. Jacob will receive his comeuppance at the hand of his brother, the firstborn, the one who *ought* to have received Isaac's blessing. Then as now, vengeance is a dish best served cold.

Siblings, *amiright*? Genesis would be a different story without them...

The authors of Genesis build tension and hope you will feel it. Esau will avenge his loss; 400 men will destroy Jacob's camp. Jacob the supplanter has no cards, no tricks, no final play.

When we teach the Jacob cycle to our kids and youth we remember Esau the hunter, Esau the simple oaf. I wonder, when we think of the reddish, hairy Esau why we so rarely recall what follows Jacob's fear.

Listen to verse four again, "Esau ran to meet [Jacob] and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and [wept]." After all that tension, the release is not a climactic battle, it's a series of disarming, surprising verbs. Where we expect anger we see nothing but grace. Esau knows what he lost. Still, he forgives his trickster brother.

Jacob, who hoped he could disarm Esau through his material offerings, planned for almost every eventuality but the one Scripture proclaims: the brother from whom he had taken everything, the one who at this moment had the upper hand, releases his resentment, and embraces his brother.

Throughout the interaction Jacob has called Esau “Lord,” claiming the deference due to the elder. Esau reframes the relationship: “I have enough, my brother.”

A surprising counter-claim against my original thesis. Perhaps siblings are not the problem after all.

Miroslav Volf, an esteemed theologian who served years ago as our Heritage Lecturer, grew up in war-torn Yugoslavia. When he was very young, the carelessness of a soldier at a nearby base led to the death of Volf’s 5-year old brother Daniel. Because there were no available ambulances, Volf’s father had to carry Daniel nearly a mile, watching as life receded from his young son’s body.

It was an unforgivable offense that would change Volf’s family forever. Shortly after Daniel’s death, though, young Volf witnessed a miracle: his parents set out to forgive the soldier. Volf’s father, with “a wound in his heartbeat would never quite heal,” visited the soldier in the hospital and pressed the military court to release him.

In his later life, Volf became known for his work on forgiveness. He bore witness to the truth of his existence: Daniel should not have died. But he proclaimed another truth too, one that his parents taught him long before he became a world-renowned theologian, “The reason why my parents forgave was simple,” Volf writes, “God forgave them, and so they forgave the soldier. But the forgiveness itself was difficult...and excruciatingly painful.”

Volf did not minimize the loss of his brother or its impact. He simply pointed to the truth. Against all odds, against prevailing reason, against common sense, Volf’s parents set out to live as a people forgiven by God. In doing so, they gave an unmerited gift to the soldier. Seeking neither retribution nor recompense, they ensured his future, and they spared another mother immeasurable grief.

In other words, long before confession could be made, the Volf family offered an embrace, mirroring what God had done in embracing each of them. God’s forgiveness changed the Volf family. *And that mattered in the worst moment of their lives.*

For Esau too, embrace preceded confession. By his act of unmerited grace, Esau ensured Jacob’s future. The blessing Jacob stole from Esau was made possible because Esau released Jacob of his guilt. By refusing retribution, Esau opened the way for his brother to finally enter the promised land and claim what Isaac unknowingly gave him.

We often focus on forgiveness narratives in the New Testament: the prodigal father, who runs to his son and embraces him for no good reason, and the “good” Samaritan, who lifts an enemy from near death and spends his resources to ensure he is restored to life. Each parable tells us something about God. Both remind me of Esau, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, who way back at the beginning of our holy Scriptures lavishes Jacob with a restorative, undeserved gift, and ensures that he will live.

Last week I told you that Jacob’s ladder was more about the God who meets us in the ordinary than about Jacob’s climb. This week is not so different. Forgiveness is not *first* about us, about the way we have been wronged and the wrongs we have propagated. Before anything else, forgiveness is about who God is and what God is up to. Any discussion about how we forgive begins and ends with the God who embraces us, who descends to us, and who, even before we can respond, claims us. Perhaps this is why we don’t teach Esau’s resolution. Forgiveness is not easy. It doesn’t forget. It bears the wounds of transgression. And it’s surely not rational. But from Esau to the prodigal father through the despised Samaritan and Miroslav’s parents, right up until Jesus’ cry on the cross, gifts of unmerited, undeserved forgiveness are the faithful way of being in the Kingdom of God.

In our petty resentments and our righteous anger, in a rage economy that views those with whom we disagree as fundamentally irredeemable, in a world where systems of injustice have found their way into almost every facet of our lives, we have to figure out how to enact God’s Kingdom, built on reconciliation, in our daily living.

There is a small moment at the end of today’s text that reminds us precisely why we’re called to live like Esau. Having been released from his guilt, Jacob sees in his brother’s face “the [very] face of God.” The man who has wrestled with angels, who saw heaven opened, who stood at Bethel next to God sees God most intimately in his brother.

God has set us amidst siblings in God’s household, which means choosing relationship over singularity, reconciliation over resentment, and embrace over enmity. For most of us that means learning how to live as those forgiven *and* learning how to forgive. And it begins when we see one another, no matter who, as siblings in the household of God, marked by the divine image, freed by divine grace.

Elias Chacour is a Palestinian Christian and former Archbishop of the Melkite Greek Church. Father Chacour, an ethnic Arab in a Greek congregation, is also an Israeli citizen. He runs *the only school system in Israel* that educates Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Druze students side-by-side.

Explaining what he sees as a theological imperative to welcome all students, Father Chacour offers a simple observation. In his corner of the world one is often asked after an introduction where they were born. It’s not a neutral question. Were you born an Israeli? An Arab? A Christian? A Muslim? Chacour responds with laughter: “I was born a baby.”

Chacour names the leveling truth of our lives. We were born, each of us — Arabs and Israelis, and Jacobs and Esaus, and Christians and Yankees and Southerners and Muslims and Jews — we were each born babies, a remarkable statement, because when we were born we came screaming into the world marked by the image of God. Before we were sinners in the garden, we were God's good creatures, claimed by the relational God who unspooled our very world.

We were — we are — called children of God. And so we are. We do not make it so at baptism, we simply remind one another of that irreducible truth. God claimed us and embraced us before we could respond, before we could give thanks or offer a confession. That is grace. And somehow (amidst our real trauma and our real joy) *that* is the model for our living.

A model repeated in God's transcendent act of forgiveness on the cross, where God finally uncoupled us from our guilt and restored us into right relationship. Where God reconciled us, so that we live as a people redeemed.

Forgiveness was a miracle on the edge of Canaan and a miracle at Golgotha. Each time it happens in our own lives it is a miracle then too.

Grace and forgiveness, at least as far as Scripture goes, are not about what we deserve. They are about who God is, and what that means for our relationships with one another. Jacob saw in Esau the face of God. Esau became for Jacob *like God*. Jacob received forgiveness, Esau gave it. Both were transformed.

This is one of those texts that is easier to preach than it is to live. But I'm going to ask you anyway — and me too, what needs reconciling in your life? Who needs forgiving?

I cannot tell you how to offer that forgiveness,
or if it will be received.
I cannot tell you what process to follow,
just like I cannot tell you what it took for Esau.
But I can tell you what it did for Esau,
and what it did for his brother, whom he likely never saw again.

I can tell you that both brothers found freedom in Esau's gift,
and that the cycle of animosity was, for a moment, broken.
I can tell you that God was there,
in Esau's face and in Jacob's new humility,
and that's an incredible thing.

I can tell you about God's grace,
the fundamental reality of your life:

before brothers and sisters and siblings and all those others whose reality presses on your own.

I can tell you about that,
and ask you to consider what to do
when your brother is in front of you,
when you see his face not as an abstract enemy,
but, even in his sin, as a child of God.

I can ask you to live in hope, in an open-armed embrace,
to receive God and reflect God, and to trust the God whose justice and mercy stands at
our beginning and our end.

I do not mean to blithely peddle forgiveness as the answer to all of our ills, only to point
out what Scripture proclaims. Be provoked by it. Be scandalized by it. Let it challenge
you. And maybe, just maybe, give it a whirl.

—Leigh Stuckey