

When Giving Becomes a Gift (Restoration)
Sermon 201 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 22, 2023
Genesis 33:1-17

People say that our world is more divided than ever. Though we all claim to want the same things, the methods of getting there are quite different and most attempts to talk about our perspectives quickly devolves into argument, making many of us wonder if healing and restoration are possible. The situation is so dire that some cultural analysts are saying there's only one thing, one person we can call agree about.

(You've heard me say it once before... does anyone remember?)

Her name is Dolly Parton. Dolly is one of the most generous people on the planet - materially speaking - she's given away millions of dollars, hundreds of millions of books, she's donated to innumerable causes, and she even helped fund the vaccine efforts during the Covid crisis of 2020. She embodies generosity where her money is concerned. She recognizes that having everything doesn't mean anything when others around her are suffering.

But that's not the story about Dolly that I want to tell today. This story is about a different kind of generosity, the seeds of which must have been planted along the way by a divine sower as Dolly gave away so many pieces of her material wealth.

In 2018, in light of the new racial awareness many in our country were experiencing, Dolly had her own awakening of sorts. Now, Dolly is as southern as they come. A daughter of rural Tennessee, a champion of southern culture and southern pride, Dolly began to recognize that the name of her dinner theater - then called *Dixie Stampede* - was more than just a romantic glorification of the past for people with southern roots - but that it was in many cases, a painful reminder of plantation life and the horrors inflicted upon African slaves for generations.

Quickly, and without hesitation, Dolly changed the name of her two dinner theaters, dropping the word *dixie* and replacing it with her own name: Dolly Parton's Stampede. When interviewed about the change, Dolly said it plain and simple: "There's such a thing as innocent ignorance, and so many of us are guilty of that... When they said *Dixie* was an offensive word I thought, 'well, I don't want to offend anybody... so we'll just call it the stampede... When you realize something is a problem, you fix it.'¹

Now Dolly is as southern as they come, and I am certain that there were things about the word *Dixie* that resonated with her and probably even informed her own identity. Southern is *who she was and is*. But when she heard that it was hurtful to others, she willingly gave it away.

¹ <https://www.thewrap.com/dolly-parton-drops-dixie-dollywood-theme-park/#:~:text=Back%20in%202018%2C%20the%20Dixie,of%20that%2C%E2%80%9D%20Parton%20says.>

It was a grand gesture of self-giving that *has the potential* to become a support beam in the proverbial bridge that will one day span the chasm of racial division in this country. Dolly gave something of herself for the sake of someone else. It seems that Dolly had learned... the gift was in the giving.

The Bible is filled with stories like this. Tales of division and restoration. In fact, one *could* argue that the grand narrative of the Bible *is* one of division and restoration - one big story made up of smaller stories all pointing us in the direction of SHALOM which means peace, wholeness... the restoration of all things.

Today's reading is one such story. A small story held within the context of the larger story of God's work in this world, bringing healing and restoration, where we thought healing would never be possible. But it doesn't come freely - no - everyone involved will have to give a little bit of themselves away, for the sake of the other. Everyone will have to learn, the gift is in the giving.

Jacob and Esau always had a healthy rivalry. Some might say neither was to blame, but that their relationship was doomed because of the family dynamics and the social and economic systems into which they were born. Remember that the inheritance laws stated the elder would gain the birthright, leaving the younger forever at his mercy. What younger child would appreciate that?! Especially in the case of twins, separated not by months or years, but by mere moments. The story of these infamous brothers began under the shadow of a prophecy - or maybe it was an omen - stating:

*Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.² (now that's a plot twist)*

You can imagine any pregnancy that began with such words would be a difficult one. But that is how it began and that is how it went. Jacob and Esau wrestled in their mother's womb - can't imagine that felt too good - then the birthing moment came; and Esau came first, but his heel was held in the grasp of Jacob's hand.

From the earliest moments, Esau was his father's favorite, while Jacob was his mother's. Esau was hairy; Jacob's skin was smooth. Esau spent his days hunting, while Jacob was tending the sheep. They could not have been more different and no one - at least so far as the biblical story is concerned - was interested in mediating their conflict. No, Isaac and Rebekah kept to their sides, with their favorite child, right up until the end when Isaac was literally on his deathbed.

Esau was out on the hunt when Rebekah and Jacob cooked up their plan, and they were successful in tricking Esau and his father Isaac out of the inheritance. Once everything unfolded and Esau understood that he'd been duped, his heart was filled with anger. And

² Genesis 25:23-24

since Esau was the stronger of the two, Jacob knew he had to run... for his life. So he left and fled to his uncle Laban's house where he would seek refuge for two decades, where he would take wives, have children, and build his own legacy through trickery and hard work.

The story of Laban and Jacob is as complicated as the sibling rivalry, but we will have to deal with that another day.

For today, suffice it to say that Jacob realized it was time to go home. Time to take his wives and their servants who had been given to him as surrogates. Time to gather up the children and the flocks Jacob had bred and raised as his own. Time to take everything he felt he had any claim to and return to the land of his father, Isaac.

Only one problem though, Esau was still there. Without telegram, telephone, or text message, Jacob had no way to know how Esau was processing his anger. So he sent some messengers out ahead with gifts - elaborate gifts like donkeys, oxen, house laborers - Jacob sent word that Esau could have it all - if only he would forgive Jacob for his transgression.

Jacob's messengers returned saying: *We found your brother, spoke to him, and he is coming to meet you, with four hundred men with him.* Jacob was afraid so he prayed to God for a blessing and a miracle. Then he divided up his flocks and his family hoping at least some of them would survive the attack. Then he gathered up more of his flock - camels, colts, and cows this time - and sent them on ahead. Another gift, another peace offering, for his distant brother.

Once everyone had departed, Jacob was truly alone. In his solitude he prayed and tried to get some sleep. But that night a man came and wrestled with him. Their struggle lasted all through the night and left Jacob with a hip injury and limp he would retain for the rest of his life. Stubborn as could be, Jacob still refuses to let the stranger go without first receiving a blessing and the name of this mysterious opponent.

"You shall no longer be called Jacob," he replied, "for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Filled with awe and wonder, Jacob rose and named the place Peniel meaning "face of God" - because it was there, in that very spot, that he did indeed encounter God.

All of this is the backstory, the context for the fateful encounter contained in today's reading. It is why the meeting of these twin brothers is filled with so much anxiety and anticipation. After decades of distance and disdain, Jacob and Esau finally see one another at the break of the horizon. What will they do? Was the divine wrestling match simply a precursor to the all out war that awaits when these two finally meet?

Jacob is undoubtedly afraid when he sees the 400 men lining up behind Esau - the ones his servants warned him about. But in a rare moment of bravery, he staggers out ahead of his own men and does something unexpected and utterly uncharacteristic: he bows, seven times before his brother. This brazen act of humility is an embodied confession. It is a gift

far greater than those he'd sent earlier, this was a gift of servitude, a gift of self. Jacob had wronged Esau, stolen his inheritance and perhaps more significantly, he had broken his most important relationship - and for what?

Now he had come to give it all back, all his wealth, all his flocks, everything he had - including his own self. But Jacob isn't the only giver. As Esau sees Jacob's figure break the horizon, he runs toward his brother (a very undignified move - one we will see again in Luke's Gospel when the father runs toward the prodigal). Esau runs toward Jacob and embraces him, a hug so hard that the pair fall to the ground, (almost as if they were wrestling). Esau collapses onto Jacob's neck and kisses him, before both of them begin to weep.

"Jacob deserves to be beaten by Esau, just as he deserved to be beaten by God." But instead, Esau generously offers a gift of his own, the gift of forgiveness.³

Two brothers, deeply entrenched on opposite sides of what seemed like an impassable divide. Two pawns playing their parts in the system of inequity that led to the whole birthright debacle - the very source of their division. Two human beings caught in a tangled web of time and story. Two brothers realizing - with God's help - that the restoration of their relationship was the most valuable gift of all. Two brothers who learned that the true gift is in the giving.

The story of Jacob and Esau, their sibling rivalry, the systems that contributed to it and the nations that were born from it, this story has innumerable parallels and applications for us today as we struggle to overcome divides that are tens, hundreds, and thousands of years in the making... but in light of the journey in recent weeks as we have considered Stewardship, Generosity, and our money story... the thing that sticks out today is that the gift is in the giving.

We can see it plain as day, once we begin to untangle ourselves from the economics of Pharaoh, once we truly recognize that there is *enough* for all when we all share, once we release our grip on the *things* that we have and begin to use our resources to reimagine a future together with God - we soon learn that the true gift isn't what we give. The gift is the act of giving. The gift isn't *what* we give, the gift is giving. Because as we give, we are transformed.

As we give, we surrender our citizenship in Pharaoh's world of scarcity and anxiety and we begin to put on our new clothes (as Paul would say), putting on the garment of Christ, and starting to live in the economy of God. Giving makes us more generous people. With our money, with our resources, and with more valuable gifts as well, gifts of time, gifts of presence, gifts of grace, gifts of understanding, gifts of confession, and gifts of forgiveness.

And as these gifts begin to freely flow, reconciliation finally becomes possible... relationships are restored.

³ de la Torre, 284

The gift *is* in the giving... And if we want to be a more loving people, a more welcoming people, a more Christ-like people... then we first must become a more generous people. People who have learned that by the giving of our whole selves, with God we might begin to heal the brokenness in our world imagine a new way of life together and restore all kinds of relationships ...

But we first must learn to give. A little here, a little there, until one day, little by little we might look back and see that we, ourselves, have been restored because the *true gift*, is in the giving.