Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage

The Courage to Seek Grace

Lent 1C-22

Genesis 32: 3-21

3/6/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Anthem**

**Genesis 33: 1-11**

Scripture lesson is in text of sermon.

“Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage”

*The Courage to Seek Grace*

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This morning, we pick up where we left off last week amid a story of family intrigue and scandal.

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Jacob had stolen the birthright of his twin brother, Esau. When Esau found out, he grew so enraged that Jacob had to flee for his life.

He ran away to a land called Paddan-aram, where he found work, and was blessed to begin building his own family. In time, he took multiple wives, was blessed with twelve children, and a great deal of wealth.

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Esau, meanwhile, didn’t chase after his brother. Ever-loyal, he remained home to serve the family that had disgraced him. But in time, he, too, built a new life from the ashes his brother had left behind, being blessed with prosperity, wives, and children of his own.

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Eventually… after who knows how many years… years of running from the guilt… years of trying to ignore the shame… Jacob finally found the *courage* to return home and *seek his brother’s grace.* He realized life would never be what it could be… what it should be… without confession.

……J  
But there was still the matter of Esau’s rage, right? Jacob had no idea if Esau would kill him… let alone forgive him. So Jacob developed an elaborate plan to send gifts ahead of him to greet Esau. He was trying to appease his brother with peace offerings, hoping it may lessen Esau’s anger.

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This is where our story picks up in Genesis 33: 1-11, which reads:

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. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

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.” Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” 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. 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.

For the Word of God in Scripture.

For the Word of God among us.

For the Word of God within us. Thanks be to God.

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Wow! Just… wow! What an incredible picture of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The last we saw Esau… he was frothing at the mouth, intent on killing his twin.

But he wasn’t just raging at his brother. He was furious with his mother for helping Jacob. Probably mad at his father for getting tricked. I mean, these three were his family—those who were supposed to support him through thick and thin—not leave him lost… and grieving… and filled with righteous anger

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We all know this kind of anger, don’t we? Not the stuff of getting frustrated or losing your patience. But the anger we feel when we’ve been betrayed, or deeply wronged.

It’s the kind of anger that doesn’t just pass. It stays… and grows.

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So we can be sure this anger abided in Esau for quite a while. It probably kept him up at night. Probably tormented his dreams. Undoubtedly affected his ability to trust others. And I’m sure it shaped the way he saw and lived in the world.

This is the kind of anger that can become like a warm blanket… you get so used to living with it… you don’t want to let it go.

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Now, it’s not that anger, in and of itself, is bad. Anger can be holy. Anger is symptomatic that something we care about has been violated.

But the all-too-slippery slope we’ve all fallen down before is that there are some grudges… some experiences of anger that are clung to for so long… and grow in such proportion… that they not only begin to consume us… *they begin to ruin us*.

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This, to be sure, is a path Esau could have trod.

And… who knows? Perhaps he did for a while. Maybe he hunted for Jacob for years but never found him. Or maybe he months on end fantasizing about what he’d say or do to his brother if he ever saw him alive.

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But eventually… at some point along his journey… Esau had to determine for himself—what was more important:

* Holding on to the grudge… or letting the wound heal.
* Self-righteous indignation… or the pursuit for what could still be.

Esau had to decide… did he wanted the rest of his life to be governed by bitterness and anger… or did he want his life to be ruled by grace.

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We don’t know how long it took Esau to choose grace… or when it happened. But we know it did happen. Because if it didn’t… if we didn’t know how Esau’s story progressed, we’d still be picturing Esau as an angry, bitter man weighed down by his own animosity towards the world.

But that’s not the Esau we find chapter 33. The Esau we find in our story today is nothing short of astonishing.

For here, rather than a man worn down by bitterness and anger… we encounter a man filled with freedom and joy as Esau not only came prepared to forgive his brother… but like the prodigal’s father… Esau ran towards Jacob… tears streaming down his face… jumping to embrace the brother who’d run away… both of them weeping amid the joy of reunion and reconciliation…

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So at some point… Esau found the courage to prioritize grace before anger.

And make no mistake:

* It took an incredible amount of courage to prioritize grace amid a world that demanded he protect his reputation at all costs.
* It took an incredible amount of courage to prioritize grace amid a culture that taught an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
* Just as it took an incredible amount of courage to choose grace in a world that views mercy as weak and vengeance as strong.

In fact, while it took real courage for Jacob to return and seek Esau’s grace… I think it probably took even more courage for Esau to let go of his anger… and choose grace over the ways of the world.

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Now here… we want to take a quick step back for a moment… and note that grace and forgiveness are not the same thing as passivity.

To forgive someone… to offer them grace… is to no longer hold their wrong against them. It means to no longer hold anger or resentment against them. But this is not the same thing as allowing the one who wronged you to harm you again.

So we want to be clear… you can forgive the one who hurt you… you can let that animosity go… without putting yourself in an environment to be victimized again. You can forgive someone, and still maintain healthy boundaries.

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And this actually gets to the heart of why grace is so important… and why it takes so much courage.

Jacob needed to *seek* his brother’s grace… but not because he had to get Esau’s forgiveness. Put simply, Jacob couldn’t force Esau to forgive him. But Jacob did need to confess his sins because, whether Esau forgave him or not, Jacob needed to own up to what he had done in order to finally be freed from carrying the burden of guilt all those years.

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Similarly, Esau’s call to prioritize grace wasn’t just about forgiving Jacob. Esau’s call to give grace was just as much about his own call to find fullness himself—fullness he could only find if he was free from the life-sucking burden of anger and rage weighing him down.

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Grace doesn’t just free the one who seeks it. It also frees the one who gives it.

Which is why, time and again, God calls us to prioritize grace in our relationships, charging us to pursue what the world may call weak… but we know takes a boatload of guts.

Confessing our sins. And forgiving those who hurt us. That we would be freed from the burdens of guilt and anger that so often skew our perspectives and limit our possibilities.

Because God knows life is not what it could be… and will never be all it should be… when we are living with either the shackles of our guilt… or amid the bitterness of our anger.

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As Jacob and Esau’s story reveals so well, “Grace can be so hard to pursue, but it’s life-changing once it’s found.”

Amen.