

August 30, 2026 – Christina Reimer

1 Peter 3:8-16; Romans 2:1-4

This summer, we have been focusing our worship services on the Peace Table and its many meanings. Today, I want to look at the Peace Table as a place of conflict and reconciliation. In good times, the table is a place of connection – of gathering together in gratitude for God’s generous plenty, of hearing about one another’s days, of speaking our love language through cooking family favourites. We just harvested another batch of green beans from our garden, so I’ll be cooking some green bean soup the way my mom used to make it. The table brings back fond memories.

When we sit at the table with others, there are also disagreements. There might be power struggles over who will serve and who will eat and who will wash the dishes. There might be times when we feel estranged from one another and the table becomes a place of silent tension. Many relatives gather for the holidays and old resentments may resurface.

There are so many stories in the Bible about family conflict. Fighting for favour from parents, fights rooted in jealousy and selfishness. Fights over resources, blessings and birthrights. There are a number of famous conflicts between brothers – Joseph and his brothers, the Prodigal son and his brother, Cain and Abel.

This morning, I want to look at a story of conflict and reconciliation between two such brothers – Jacob and Esau.

Like many biblical family stories, we start with barrenness. Isaac and Rebekah have waited and waited for a child, and, when they finally become pregnant with twins, Rebekah feels a great struggle between the two babies inside of her. When she asks God why this is happening, God tells her that there are two nations in her womb; that the one people will be stronger than the other, and that the youngest child will rule over the elder child.

Place yourself in Rebekah’s world: why, after all of this waiting to become pregnant, does God foresee or even create conflict between the brothers before they are even born? And how do we today try to understand how children are born into a world of socio-political injustice and structures of dominance and servitude without deserving any of it? So many children in so many parts of the world are born into conflicts they have not themselves created. Let’s not forget Isaac’s own trauma from when his father was willing to offer him up in sacrifice to God. Perhaps there is an element of intergenerational trauma that Isaac is passing on to his twin sons.

The Buddhists teach that suffering is a way of life that we are born into. Conflict, too, is an inevitable part of our human story. Why do we assume that happiness or peace are the starting point instead of conflict? Maybe peace isn’t something original that we try to get back to, but something that always takes discipline and intention to achieve.

Esau is the firstborn. He is described as hairy and red and is his father’s favourite because of his love of hunting and manly pursuits. Jacob is born second, but pulls on the heel of his brother in an attempt to be born first. Jacob is his mother’s favourite. He stays near home and is a

wonderful cook. Does Jacob know what God has foretold to Rebekah about his destiny? Does Jacob also know that his father favours Esau? Jacob is born into a family dynamic that will take him a lifetime of learning and struggle to resolve.

Later in adolescence, Esau goes out to hunt to put food on the table, with no luck. He comes back famished and asks Jacob for some of his delicious food. Jacob, ever the cleverer brother, sees an opportunity to gain power. Jacob says that he will give Esau food if he gives him his birthright. Esau impulsively agrees.

This is only one of Esau's experiences of humiliation at the hands of his brother. Let's picture Esau finishing his food after trying to provide for his family and failing, and realizing that he has given up his future in a moment of desperation to the brother more loved by their mother who has taken advantage of his situation. One can feel the deep, lifelong tension escalating.

James Gilligan is an American psychiatrist who has focused his work and research on violence, particularly among men who have been incarcerated. He says that being shamed or humiliated is one of the most prevalent roots of violence and that "all violence is an attempt to achieve justice."¹ In other words, once one feels humiliated, or like a victim of injustice, it is natural to believe that one is justified in committing acts of retaliation in order to regain one's pride. But retaliation only perpetuates the cycle of humiliation and violence. When Jesus encounters those who have been shamed and humiliated, he restores their dignity and their full humanity. We know that Jesus himself suffered deep humiliation, but refused to retaliate, showing us how to break cycles of violence.

When Isaac is old and almost blind, he calls to Esau to go out hunting and bring him some wild meat after which he will give Esau his blessing as the first born. The blessing is what ultimately would secure Esau's birthright, which he has already compromised by trading it for some stew. It is a second chance to regain dignity. But Rebekah overhears the conversation and tells Jacob to cover himself with goat hair, so that Isaac will mistake him for Esau.

Isaac falls for this deception and gives Jacob his blessing meant for Esau. When Esau comes back and finds out what has happened, he cries out bitterly and says: "Bless me – me too, my father!" (27:34). But it is too late. Suffering yet another humiliation, Esau vows to kill Jacob once Isaac is dead, so Jacob flees to live with Laban, Rebekah's brother. Meanwhile, Esau marries foreign Canaanite women, most likely to spite his family. The brothers don't see each other again for years.

Consider Rebekah and Isaac at this point. For Rebekah, God's word is being fulfilled and her favourite son has won, but she has tricked her husband and oldest son and will never see Jacob again in her lifetime. Does she feel guilt? Is she heartbroken over her fractured family? Is she angry at God for putting her in this situation? And what does Isaac feel? Betrayal? Like a fool for falling for Jacob and Rebekah's tricks? Guilty for denying his favourite eldest son his birthright and blessing? We know what Esau is going through, but what about Jacob? Other than fearing

¹ James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*.

for his life, does he have any regrets? Does he blame his mother and God for the fact that he has made an enemy of his brother and brought shame to his father?

I ask these questions because there are so many layers to conflict and things beneath the surface that we can't see. We can forget this and assume that we know exactly what's going on for the other. But we only know a small bit of what they reveal to us. Then we interpret what they reveal and take our own interpretation for truth. Once we have decided on this truth, it is very difficult to budge from it. The best assumption that we can make in conflict, is that we really don't know everything about the other.

In our passage from Romans this week, we are reminded that only God can judge because God alone knows the whole truth. God can see clearly into all of the things that are left unsaid. But we do not see the whole, so we are poorly equipped to judge.

These last weeks, I've been reading a book called *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* by John Paul Lederach, a mediator and professor of peacebuilding. He analyzes the story of Jacob and Esau through the lens of reconciliation, talking about how the brothers turn away from one another in conflict, then turn towards one another in reconciliation.

As a mediator, Lederach usually encourages people to face one another and come back to the peace table in conversation. But he also asks if it is sometimes necessary for people to move away from each other for a while. To distance ourselves from our source of pain until we are ready to come back again. If I can catch myself in a moment of reactivity, I tell myself to "pause" so that I can respond well a bit later rather than defensively or hurtfully in the moment.

As we've heard, Jacob runs from Esau because Esau plans to kill him. And they spend years apart – nearly 25 years. Maybe they needed this time to grow and heal and gain perspective. Maybe taking a pause isn't a cowardly act, but the wisest way forward. Sometimes we need to leave before we can come back.

If this is the case, what is it that changes in each of them during this time? What prompts them to turn towards one another again? Did Esau need to find his own life away from his family? Was Jacob transformed by his own experience of being deceived – when he was tricked into marrying a different woman before marrying the woman he loves? (A soap opera story for another sermon.)

It is God who initiates the turning towards. God tells Jacob: "Go back to the land of your father. I will be with you." God often prepares the way for reconciliation – offering a reassuring presence and going ahead to set the conditions necessary for peacemaking.

As Jacob approaches Esau's home, he sends some of his men to appraise the situation and they come back with frightening news: Esau is aware of Jacob's arrival and is coming with hundreds of men at his side. So Jacob sends gifts ahead to placate Esau. He also sends everyone in his company before him while he stays back by himself. During the night, a man comes to Jacob and wrestles with him until daybreak. The man dislocates Jacob's hip, but he refuses to give up until he has been blessed. The man finally concedes and says, "your name will no longer be Jacob, but

Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Genesis 32:28).

The name “Israel” is certainly a significant part of God’s covenant story with God’s people, but we can also see this new name as a sign of Jacob’s personal transformation through conflict and struggle. And this transformation happens as a part of God’s preparation for a path to peace for Jacob and Esau. During that long night, did Jacob wrestle with himself and the man he was? Did he confront his own deceptiveness and selfishness? His part in the breaking of family relationships?

Jacob builds an altar to remember that he has seen the face of God and lived. He has also seen his own face and lived. And now he hopes to see the face of his brother, his enemy, and live. And sure enough, when the brothers finally see each other, Jacob bows to Esau, and Esau kisses his brother and they weep.

What’s interesting is that Jacob and Esau don’t live together happily ever after. They make peace and then go their separate ways. Perhaps this is also a happy ending. Perhaps forgiveness doesn’t require us to stay in relationships that don’t work in close quarters. Perhaps when Jacob and Esau turn away again and part ways, they are making a turn towards their own selves and what their selves need.

In conclusion, Lederach writes: “Reconciliation is not to quickly forgive and forget, as if it never happened...Reconciliation requires that *we remember and change*.”² Jacob and Esau are not unique in the biblical story. Many biblical characters are flawed, born into conflict and journey towards reconciliation. The Bible teaches us that we are not necessarily born into peace, but struggle towards it with God’s presence and Jesus’ example. This is our true blessing. Our scripture passage from 1 Peter says: “do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called” (3:8-9).

This morning, I pray for each one of us – that God will bless us with a spirit of wisdom and courage to break cycles of humiliation and resentment and that we may all find a seat at God’s table of reconciliation.

Amen.

² Lederach, 81.