

“Family Reunions”
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I had a family reunion last Friday night. It was over in Martinez. I really didn't want to go. Really. It was all the cousins on my mother's side of the family. Several of them came from North Dakota and Arizona. Most of the cousins are about 10 to 12 years older than I am. They all spent summers together on an uncle's ranch in North Dakota. They have wonderful memories together. By the time I came along, they were all grown up and married. I don't really know them too well, what I know about them I don't particularly like. A couple of them I don't like at all with reason.

Well, I don't suppose my family is especially different than anybody else's family. I got a lot of pressure to go to the reunion however. My sister kept emailing me about how important it was. A cousin wrote and said this is probably the last time we will have a reunion because too many of the cousins are getting frail and won't be able to travel anymore.

Yeah yeah. I think of all the reasons I am not particularly interested in any of my cousins. The cousin that is my age did something to someone else 40 years ago when we were in college that I thought was really bad. I really don't want to have to see her. Another cousin was rude to my sister 20 years ago and I don't feel like seeing her again either. Well, it is summer time. Lots of people are having family reunions. There was a Biblical family reunion that was filled with old grievances and suspicions.

Jacob and Esau. Do you remember the story? Jacob and Esau were twins. Normally twins have a very close bond and uncanny connection if you will, a bond that is deeper than any other relation they have to other people. But the animosity between Jacob and Esau started in the womb. Their mother Rebecca experienced a very painful pregnancy as her twin babies struggled together within her. She prayed to God in agony, and God responded, “Two nations are in your womb and two peoples born of you shall be divided.”

When they were born, Esau was born first, but Jacob was quite literally grasping Esau's heel. The boys couldn't have been more different. Esau was big, red-haired and athletic. Jacob was smaller, smooth-skinned, and a quiet man. Esau loved to be out on the hunt. Jacob was content to stay at home. Esau was his father's favorite. Jacob was his mother's favorite.

There were two incidents that drove a wedge between the boys. The first was almost like a joke, but it had grave consequences. Esau came home from hunting, sweaty and tired and ravenously hungry. Jacob was fixing a big pot of lentil stew that smelled delicious. Esau, being the bossy older brother said, “Hey little brother gives me some of that stew, I'm starving.” Jacob, the smart alecky younger brother said, “Not until you sell me your birthright.”

Now that was certainly no joke. The birthright was the innate right and privilege and the livelihood of the eldest son. It was the most coveted and esteemed status in the ancient world. When the oldest son received his father's blessing, he received a double portion of the father's property and became the head of the father's household.

A few years later, Isaac, the father of the twins became old and feeble. He called his oldest son, Esau to him and wanted to give him the blessing for the oldest son that was rightfully his. Isaac sent Esau out to hunt some game and prepare a meal, and then he would bless him and they would have a feast.

While Esau was out hunting, Rebecca called Jacob. She cooked food for her son to give to his father. She knew that Isaac's eyesight was gone, so she gave Jacob an animal skin for his arms. She knew if Isaac reached out to touch his son, he could see if it was Jacob or Esau. When Isaac ate the food that Rebecca had prepared, he had his son kneel and he touched his arm. The arm certainly felt like the arm of Esau. So Isaac gave Jacob the blessings that were meant for Esau. The blessings were beautiful and moving. "May God give you of the dew of heaven. And of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Be lord over your brother and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be anyone who curses you and blessed by everyone who blesses you."

Well you can imagine what happened when Esau came home from the hunt and realized he had been tricked. He was angry, really angry; so angry he wanted to kill Jacob. Probably most of us can relate to these feelings. When we love someone and they hurt us, hurt and anger can mix together very easily. You can't believe your own sister, your own brother, your own cousin, could do something so awful. Esau was so furious with what Jacob had done to him that he made plans to kill him.

Now it is not all that difficult for a hurt or a misunderstanding between two people, even siblings or the dearest of friends, to turn to disdain or anger. It is not that difficult for a small thing to become a big thing and all of a sudden there is a gulf between you that steadily grows, until you don't talk to each other for a month, or a year, which becomes a decade.

For 20 years Jacob stayed away. He fled to the desert. He married two wives, became rich with many sheep and goats and many children. Then it was time to go home. But Jacob was afraid. Esau was a great warrior the head of many men.

As the meeting time got closer Jacob became more and more frightened. He sent ahead a gift for Esau to try and win him over and appease his old simmering anger. Now, some of us might send flowers or a gift card to a nice restaurant, but Jacob's gift reflect the enormity of his fear. He sent a huge flock of livestock ahead of him. He sent his wives and children ahead of him, and he stayed behind on the other side of the Jabbock River. He spent all night wrestling with God and wrestling with his fears. We might think Jacob was a bit of a wimp. He didn't protect his wife and children. He sent them ahead of him as a shield. The day came and Jacob crossed the Jabbock and went to meet his brother.

Now, there are two surprises in the story. The first is that it is Esau who runs to Jacob and embraces him. He falls on his neck and weeps for joy to see him. Esau is confused by the extravagant gift that Jacob has sent on ahead. He doesn't need it and doesn't want it. He will not accept Jacob's gifts for the bribe that it is. Love doesn't work that way.

The second surprise is that Jacob is not able to be accepted so fully. Jacob refuses Esau's kind offer to travel with him. He cannot totally accept his hospitality. It seems that he is suspicious. Why are you being so nice to me, anyway? Jacob thinks He is still suspicious and skeptical.

We can be like Jacob as well. God's love, no conditions, open acceptance, wholehearted sincerity – even in the face of wrong and hurt is very difficult for us to accept. It is even more difficult to practice giving the love when a wrong has been done. The story of Jacob and Esau is not the story of an ideal family.

I don't come from an ideal family either. Maybe you don't come from an ideal family. In this summer time of reunions we have an opportunity to practice the love of God that Esau shows us. And we have the opportunity to work on being accepted, being loved – something that Jacob couldn't quite do.

The story of Jacob and Esau is the story of God's love working through less than perfect families bringing the power of reunion and renewal, even to us!