

“Our Money Story: Restore”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, November 24, 2024

Texts: John 21: 1-19 and Genesis 33: 1-17

Some have suggested that these two started fighting while in the womb.

Yes, I’m talking about Jacob and Esau. They are famous – or infamous – brothers of the book of Genesis. Perhaps you know their story, but perhaps not. Shortly, I’ll share a cliff notes version of the story, but suffice it to say that these two were more than rivals. In many ways, they lived much of their lives as enemies, with Jacob taking advantage of Esau and others, and Esau planning revenge. It was all part of their money story from the beginning. I think there are others of us who have echoes of this same story, where money, power, prestige, honor, birthright, parents, competition, and whatever else, all came together to break relationship and make for adversarial family relations, to say the least! And yet, at this point in the story, the brothers restore their relationship – sort of – which makes us think about what is possible for our own relationships.

I invite you to check out the book of Genesis for the whole story, but here’s the cliff notes version. Jacob and Esau were the perennial biblical examples of competition gone crazy. Jacob cheated Esau out of his blessing from their father,

Isaac. Much of this was orchestrated by their mother favoring Jacob. Jacob did many more dishonest things, including entering to a strange relationship with Laban and Laban's daughters. Again, Jacob manipulated everybody for his own ends, but of course, Laban did the same. The daughters didn't have much to say in the matter, which makes this story even more troubling.

“Now, Jacob has just wrestled with a stranger (an angel, God?) and now, in preparation to meet his brother, is likely wrestling inwardly with his feelings about his relationship to Esau, their father, and his own sense of worth. Esau's radical forgiveness is significant given the lengths to which he has been cheated.” The stolen birthright earlier in Genesis have disadvantaged Esau, but also generations that are to follow. “Strikingly, Jacob sends servants/livestock ahead of him to appease his brother” (Rev. Sarah Are Speed). How many people try to right their wrongs by “buying someone off”? Another twist to these two men's money story. “Esau, released from burning resentment says, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself’ (Genesis 33:9).

Our story for today invites us to think about the role of restoration in our lives. As Sara Are Speed writes, “While salvation is not ours to attain, ultimately stewardship calls for an examination of our hearts as we investigate our own

experiences, fears, desires and passions with money.” Thanksgiving is a perfect time for us to reflect on these experiences. Have you been wronged like Esau was? Have you acted more like Jacob? How has money – your money story – played into how much forgiveness you have, or how much you desire restoration?

These are tough, but necessary questions. For no matter how we answer, our experiences impact directly on how we live, how we give, and our general disposition. I’ve quoted Richard Rohr hundreds of times saying, “Pain that is not transformed is transmitted.” I think it is true that somewhere along the line, Esau dealt with his hurt, his anger, and his frustration with his brother. No longer did he seek revenge. Maybe he watched from afar as his brother encountered numerous struggles of his own and watched his brother grow and mature? Maybe he just decided it was not worth the effort to remain mad for a lifetime? As we consider these questions, though, note that in the story the brothers did not end up living near one another. They restored a relationship, but they weren’t best friends from here on. They lived near each other, but not with each other. Sometimes restoration doesn’t involve making everything wonderful like a sappy movie. Sometimes restoration means simply being released from resentment, anger and the need for retribution. It’s dealing with our feelings and

coming up with another answer. What we do not only impacts our own life, but the lives of others around us.

And money stories in our family can be the most hurtful. I know in my own family there were several money issues, usually involving my dad. The truth is that there were a lot of issues with my dad and I. It wasn't until the Men's Rite of Passage I experienced in 2017 that I finally came to conclusion that my dad wasn't the Dad I needed, but he was still my dad. Our relationship improved dramatically as I wasn't seeking something that he was unable to do. No, it didn't fix everything. At the same time that story didn't hold the same power over me. And, it gave me language to use with my own children, especially related to how we handle money as a family and between family members.

Restoration did more for Esau than it did for Jacob and that is the point. We don't do this to fix someone else, or to smooth things over, or to shove them under the rug. We deal with our relationships and our feelings so that we may find a sense of peace ourselves, regardless of what happens with the other person.

Julie Rains writes, "God is always working to build community and often intervenes so that we will forgive and be forgiven, and relationships can be

restored. No matter how much he repents of his past, Jacob may not be accepted and embraced by his brother. In this situation, though, God has been working in Esau's life. The previously defeated brother has not become bitter. He has not wasted his life and created wealth in his own right. Perhaps he has also made peace with God for his mistake of so easily trading his inheritance for a bowl of soup. At any rate, Esau gladly welcomes his brother Jacob. The simple lesson here is that I must avoid bitterness (*no matter how well deserved*), offer forgiveness, and seek reconciliation if I want to live in community."

In the words of Rev. Mieke Vandersall, "This is the choice: live in the old stories, or make new ones. Find ourselves in fear of the money stories that have taken hold of our lives, or transform them to create them into a new economy."

This whole series about *Our Money Story* has been about much more than money, or how much we give to the church. Are you surprised? Was it surprising that there is much more behind what we do with our money than how much we have or how much the church needs? For the real story of stewardship is that God provides enough for all, it is what we do with money and relationship that impact our money stories. And our money stories can sometimes end up controlling our life narrative going forward. The time has come for us to

investigate our own money stories and the family, friends, acquaintances, employes, neighbors, friends, society -- you name it -- that have impacted them. And then to ask the question: is my money story serving me well? Or, do I need to make some life changes? Do I need to let some things go, or do I just need to say the story doesn't have the same kind of power and live that way?

I don't have the answers for you. I hope that during this four-week study we have raised important questions that have led to healing and hope. I hope that we truly have given you something to be thankful for this year. And maybe, just maybe, we can have a more enjoyable Thanksgiving and Christmas season if we make new choices about how our money stories shape our lives.