

August 5, 2012

Jacob

Dealing with Dead Trees

Genesis 33:1-12

Opening words:

Oscar Wilde once said, "*Forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them so much.*" Today, I want to look at one of the most unnatural things in the world, forgiveness. How many people do you know refuse to forgive someone in their life? Sometimes the issue is big; sometimes the issue is small. Sometimes it is over a misunderstanding; sometimes it is over an intentional act. Sometimes it is over an emotional or passionate act. There are a million stories. The details really don't matter. The only thing that matter is your unforgiving spirit. I hate to say it but you know it is true. One of the true characteristics of a discipleship is forgiveness.

This is message number eight in my summer sermon series on Jacob. Our hero's journey is nearing an end. After a twenty year absence, he is home again. His heart is filled with mixed emotions. He is happy to be home but he is dreading his reunion with his brother, Esau. He received from his brother an unlikely gift, forgiveness. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 33:1-12. Let me call this message *Dealing with Dead Trees*.

Genesis 33:1-12

1 Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. 2 He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. 3 He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

4 But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. 5 Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." 6 Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. 7 Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. 8 Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?"

"To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said. 9 But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." 10 "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. 11 Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it. 12 Then Esau said, "Let us be on our way; I'll accompany you."

In his book Lee: The Last Years, Charles Bracelen Flood reports that after the Civil War, Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. The tree had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She was

lamenting over the loss of the tree. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, *"Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it. It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to poison the rest of our life."* Robert E. Lee knew the power of forgiveness. How many dead trees fill your life?

At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is forgiveness. The day that Jacob had been dreading for twenty years had finally come. Two decades earlier he ran away to escape his problems. Jacob was physically absent but he was emotionally present. The longer he was gone; the more he missed home. He was only about 350 miles away but he was isolated. There were no modern day communication techniques. There were no cellular telephones, world wide internet, fax machines or texts. There was no modern day transportation. There were no planes, cars, trucks, or subway systems. Just think about it for a moment. He was only 350 miles away but Jacob was living in complete isolation. At some point, he began to worry about home. He wondered how is brother was doing? Sure, he was red and hairy but he had a fun side. He wondered how his father was doing. Had he gone completely blind? Did he miss him? Was he dead? He wondered about his mother? He wondered how she was doing. Did she miss him or had she forgotten him? Was she dead? In twenty years, he grew to miss his home. Have you ever been somewhere and just wanted to go home?

The only reason Jacob couldn't go home were those dead trees. He was not proud of his past; He was ashamed of his past. The way he had tricked his brother out of the birthright. The way he exploited his father's poor eyesight to receive the blessing. Those short term victories had turned into long term defeats. Jacob had a good life with Uncle Laban. However, he couldn't truly appreciate his good life because his past was haunting him. He could not see all the blessings because the dead trees from his past were blocking the view. He goes home hoping to find one of the most unnatural things in the world, forgiveness! Does anyone here need to be forgiven? Does anyone one here need to forgive?

Today, I want to look at three divine truths about forgiveness. Each one of these things is illustrated for us in Jacob's story. Each one is alive and well in our world today. Here are the three divine truths.

1. Relationships are important

2. Forgiveness is unnatural

3. Forgiveness is cleansing

If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"** The time has come to cut down your dead trees!

Relationships are important!

This is divine truth number one. Relationships are important. We were not meant to live in isolation. We were designed from the very beginning to live in community. After two decades of absence, Jacob returns home to re-establish s relationship with his family. He wanted to see his father. He wanted to see his mother. He wanted to see his brother. With eight billion people in the world, you will only have one father. You will only have one mother. Your relationships with your siblings are intense because you share a common past. Like it or not, the relationships you have with your siblings are

important. Learning how to forgive is important because it maintains the most important relationships in your life. If you don't know how to forgive then you may damage those relationships. If you find some truth there say, "Amen!"

Several years ago, I received the news that one of our own had died. The widower was suddenly alone. I went to the funeral home to make his wife's final arrangements. In the emotions of that moment we sat there and made those difficult decisions. When the funeral director asked about placing an obituary in the paper the widower fired back, "There will be no obituary!" The funeral director and I didn't say a word but our looks asked the question, "Why?" He said, "I don't want my daughters to know their mother is dead." He went on to tell us a story about some grandson's tattoo and body piercing. He said the grandson got them for some sexual reason. In the past, there was some big fight over the issue and the family hadn't spoken in years. He closed by say, "If they wouldn't visit their mother in life, then they are not going to visit their mother in death." I looked at him and said calmly, "If you ever want to have a relationship with your daughters and grandchildren then let them know." The phone suddenly rang and the funeral director answered it. The daughters had heard about their mother's passing and wanted to see her. They came but their father left. The dead tree sat there undisturbed.

How valuable are the relationships in your life? You will only have one mother. You will only have one father. You and your siblings share a common past. Maintaining those relationships are important. I have said it in the past. Sinning is not doing something wrong. Sinning is damaging the relationships in your life. Does anyone here need to be forgiven? Is there someone in your life you need to forgive? How many dead trees in your life need to be cut down? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

Forgiveness is unnatural!

This is divine truth number two. Forgiveness is unnatural. The natural reaction is not to forgive. Jacob did expect Esau to forgive him. You really can't blame him. According to the first verse in the scripture lesson, Jacob saw Esau coming with four hundred men. Jacob responds by dividing his people up because he expects a fight. He divides his children up among Leah, Rachel and the two handmaidens. He put the handmaidens and their children in the front. Leah and her children are next. Rachel and Joseph are in the rear. Jacob stands in front of them all. He tries to avoid a fight so he bows to his brother seven times. The digit seven in the Bible means completeness. Bowing is a sign of submission. It is at this moment Esau does the most unnatural thing. Verse four says he ran to his brother and embraced him. Everything in the past is forgiven and there were tears of joy. So to speak, Esau took a mighty ax and cut down the dead tree. The world told Esau to take a stand! Jacob tricked him out of the birthright. Jacob had stolen the blessing, costing him respect and money. The world says, "Don't forgive!" However, the divine thing to do is forgive! Is there someone you need to forgive? Jesus forgave when he did nothing wrong. You remember the scene. The Master is hanging on the cross. The end is near. He is down to his last few words. Every word counted. Jesus opened his mouth and said, "*Father forgive them because they don't know what they are doing!*" (Luke 23:34) If Jesus can forgive, then why can't you forgive? You are a disciple of Jesus Christ! If that makes you ponder say, "**Amen!**"

Forgiveness is cleansing!

This is the third and final divine truth. Forgiveness is cleansing. There is a wonderful reunion in this story. Two things happened when Esau forgave Jacob. First, the brothers re-established a relationship. Second, Esau established a relationship with his sister-in-laws and their children. Those relationships brought him new blessings. None of them would have been possible without forgiveness. Just think of the blessings you will receive once you cut down the dead trees in your life. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Sue Norton lives in Arkansas City, Kansas. In January of 1990 she received a horrible phone call. Her father Richard and his wife Virginia had been shot in their isolated Oklahoma farmhouse. The crime netted the killer \$17 and an old truck. The news left her numb and broken hearted. The killer was a man named Robert Knighton (B.K.). When she went to the trial everyone was filled with hate. Everyone expected her to be filled with hate but she couldn't hate B.K. She said hating him made her feel worse. She made a decision near the end of the trial. He wasn't going to hate the man; she was going to try to forgive the man. The next day, she got permission to visit B.K. At first, she was scarred. It was her first experience in a prison. B.K. was big and tall. He was shackled and had cold steely eyes. At first, B.K. refused to look at Sue. She asked him to turn around and he answered, "Why would any one want to talk to me after what I have done?" Sue replied, "I want you to know that I don't hate you. My grandmother always taught me not to use the word hate. She taught me that we are here to love one another. If you are guilty, I forgive you." B.K. thought Sue was just playing games. He couldn't understand how she could forgive him for such a terrible crime. Sue says, "I didn't think of him as killer, I thought of him as a human being." People thought that Sue had lost her mind. Friends would step to the other side of the road to avoid her. But Sue says, "There is no way to heal and get over the trauma without forgiveness. You must forgive and forget. You must get on with your life. That is what Jesus would do."

When B.K. was on death row in Oklahoma, Sue wrote him and visited him occasionally. She felt that B.K. should never leave prison, but she didn't want him executed. She became friends with B.K. Because of her love and friendship, B.K. became a devout Christian. Sue states, "Some good has come out of her Daddy's death. I have been able to witness to many people about Jesus. I have taught about forgiveness and helped others to heal. Sue gave an eloquent speech to the parole board pleading to save B.K.'s life. However, B.K. was executed by the state of Oklahoma on May 27, 2003. Today, Sue lives at peace with herself. She cut down the largest dead tree in her life. It is a hard story for many to understand.

After all, forgiveness is unnatural. If you want the world to think you are crazy then forgive someone who has done you wrong. Why forgive? We forgive because the relationships in our lives are important. We forgive because Christ forgave us. Indira Gandhi once said, *"Forgiveness is a virtue of the brave."* How brave are you? Cut down a dead tree today and forgive someone. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**