

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Relationally"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 27:1-27a, 34-35, 41-45
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 12, 2017, at First UMC (Boy Scout Sunday & Valentine's)

INTRODUCTION

Since Valentine's Day is coming up on Tuesday, a lot of us have been thinking about our relationships. Besides our romantic partners, some of us may have purchased Valentine's cards and gifts for parents, children, classmates, teachers, and friends. When we think of love—especially Christian love—that love can extend to any number of people. Jesus taught that we should love our neighbors, which, by his definition included people of different ethnic and religious groups. And Jesus even taught that we should love our enemies. When you push love that far, it becomes pretty obvious that most of us fall short of the loving standard Jesus set. Whether we're talking about our most intimate relationships—or the kind of relationships we have at work, in the community, with the Boy Scout Troop, or with people around the world—most of us could benefit from some improvement in our relationship skills.

Ever since January first, I've been preaching a sermon series on starting the New Year well. So far, we've talked about what it means to be healthy mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, creatively, and societally. On this weekend before Valentine's Day, I thought it would be good for us to consider the complex family story in Genesis 27. In this family drama, we can quickly glean at least five all-around good strategies for starting the New Year well relationally.

1—BEING HONEST

The first way we can start the New Year well relationally is by being honest. The story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob is a classic case study in what goes wrong when people aren't honest with each other. When Rebekah heard her husband Isaac tell his favorite son Esau that he would receive the father's blessing, Rebekah quickly worked up a deceitful scheme to change the course of events. By lying and dishonesty, she enabled her favorite son Jacob to obtain his father's blessing instead.

Sometimes we justify dishonesty because we think the end justifies the means. We tell ourselves that it's OK to lie and cheat if we gain something in the process. But this story in Genesis 27 tells us that Jacob didn't gain all that much. While his father did bless him, it was a blessing that was severely compromised by the hatred and murderous anger of his twin brother. It was a blessing that could only be realized by fleeing to safety in a far-distant land. Whatever blessing Jacob received, it was gained at the incredibly great cost of having to move away from his mother, whom he would never see alive again, and away from his father and twin brother, whom he'd not see again for 20 years.¹ You can't help but wonder if Jacob's life wouldn't have been a lot more blessed if he'd been honest with his father and had been able to continue living near his family.

When we lie and deceive, we destroy trust and create hard feelings between us and those who might otherwise love us and enjoy having us around. Healthy relationships begin with being honest.

2—COMMUNICATING OUR CONCERNS

Being well relationally sometimes also requires communicating our concerns. When we're tempted to be dishonest, it's usually because we're afraid we won't get what we want or need. The cure for that problem isn't dishonesty or passive-aggressive sneaking around behind people's backs. It's directness. Rather than expecting other people to read our minds and intuit our feelings, we very often must tell them what we need and want. Sometimes the people who hold power in our lives—parents, siblings, romantic partners, employers, teachers, and community leaders—really don't know what we're feeling. They don't understand our needs, wants, and fears. They don't know or understand because we haven't spoken our minds. We haven't done a good job of communicating our concerns.

Can you imagine how different the story of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob might have turned out if Rebekah would have talked to her husband about the problem of giving the entire paternal blessing to just one of their twin sons? I know wives didn't have much authority in those days, but Rebekah could have at least tried to convince her husband the importance of being fair to both of their sons. Jacob also needed to

try to speak to his father about the need to include him in the family blessings. If Rebekah or Jacob couldn't get a hearing on their own, then they could have teamed up to go to Isaac together. If that didn't work, then they could have sought the help of some other wise and authoritative persons in their extended family or community.

When we're feeling discriminated against or vulnerable, we all have a tendency to think that no one will listen to us. But the truth is that we usually can get a hearing if we take enough people with us. It's just like the reality that politicians may ignore us if we're only one person calling or writing to them about a particular issue. But if we mobilize hundreds, thousands, and millions for the same concern, then we have a better chance of getting their attention.

Fortunately, most relationships don't require that much effort. Most of the people with whom we want to be in relationship also want to help and please us. Most of the time, they just need to be made aware of what we want and need. Most of the time, we just need to tell them. Starting the New Year well relationally requires communicating our concerns.

3—LISTENING

A third strategy for healthy relationships is listening. If Rebekah and Jacob were guilty of dishonesty and not speaking up sufficiently, Isaac and Esau were probably guilty of not listening. Anyone who really wants to be in a relationship with other people has to be willing to stop talking long enough for the other person to get a few words in edgewise. Anyone who wants to have quality relationships has to create an opening for family members and acquaintances to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and offer their own ideas. Anyone who wants to nurture friendships and family ties has to be willing to let down their guard and their authority long enough to allow other people—even younger, less-powerful, less-wise, or less-capable people—to express their opinions, hopes, interests, and needs. Anyone who is unwilling to open their ears and minds in those ways diminishes connections and cuts off relationship possibilities. Starting the New Year well relationally requires listening.

4—PRACTICING SAFE SPACE

A fourth strategy for developing healthy relationships is practicing safe space. Truth be told, there are some times in our lives when the only way we can preserve a relationship is by creating some distance. Just like Jacob had to flee for his safety, sometimes we have to get away and give ourselves and our relationship partners the time and space to heal and forgive. Before we can fine tune our relationships, sometimes we simply have to make sure we and they are safe from irritation, abuse, and injustice. When Esau got so angry that he was threatening murder, Jacob had little recourse but to leave.

When we especially value a relationship or maybe when we feel some insecurity in a relationship, sometimes we push too hard or cling too tightly, when what we really need to do is back off. It hurts to feel rejected, unappreciated, or uncared for. It hurts to feel like we're the only one who's putting effort into the relationship. But if our steps toward the other person are only greeted by them backing away more, or lashing out at us more, or even just not reciprocating our affections and interest—then we should realize that our efforts at the relationship may be doing more harm than good. Maybe what would be more helpful would be to give ourselves and others the space we all need to mature, heal, develop our own strengths, and forgive. Sometimes all that means is taking a little time in the man cave or taking a women's night out away from the demands of the family. Sometimes the space required may be much more. But, for sure, starting the New Year well relationally involves practicing safe space.

5—COMING TOGETHER WHENEVER POSSIBLE

That said, starting the New Year well relationally also requires coming together whenever possible. We only read from Genesis chapter 27. If we had read further, we would have learned that, after about 20 years, Jacob was able to return home. It was risky. Jacob was scared that his brother Esau would still be holding a grudge. As Jacob made his journey back to their homeland, he had nightmares and prepared for the possibility that Esau might try to destroy his flocks and his family. Fortunately, when Jacob and Esau

finally met, all was well. Jacob did everything he could to make amends, and Esau forgave him and was glad to have his twin brother back home.

I don't think any of us can go through life without straining a relationship—or two or three or ten. And some relationships are OK to let go; they just aren't all that important. But for relationships that are at the core of our lives—relationships with parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, and best friends forever—we need to do everything in our power to repair and mend the broken places. We need to be willing to equalize our differences, share our resources, empathize with each other's pain, give attention fairly, and join together in common responsibility. Starting the New Year well relationally requires coming together whenever possible.

CONCLUSION

A few weeks ago, I read a news story about a man named Lamar Wallace who celebrated his 105th birthday last fall. In 105 years, Lamar Wallace developed a lot of relationships. That particular news story was written about the elderly man's connection to Boy Scouts. Lamar earned his Eagle Scout award 90 years ago, when he was 15. When interviewed, Mr. Wallace indicated that he “used Scouting a lot” throughout his long life. “The values of Scouting—clean living, honesty, respect for others, [and] leadership—are something that stayed with” him and helped him with all his relationships.²

Whether we're 105 or 15 or somewhere in between, having good values and social skills is a pretty important part of a healthy life. So, let's apply these learnings from Genesis 27. Let's practice being honest, communicating our concerns, listening, practicing safe space, and coming together whenever possible. These are great strategies for starting the New Year well relationally.

¹Genesis 31:41.

²<http://blog.scoutingmagazine.org/2017/01/11/lamar-wallace-likely-the-oldest-living-eagle-scout-turns-105/>