

SERMON TITLE: "Developing Relational Strength for Life's Challenges"  
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 33:1-17  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 19, 2020, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every year, the United Methodist Church claims the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as Human Relations Day. This is a time when we think about how we treat other human beings in our society, and we collect a special offering for some United Methodist ministries that advance those relationships. Hopefully, like Jesus, we remember to care about the plight of the poor and the underprivileged—not just on this weekend, but all throughout the year.

Of course, now that we're slightly past mid-January, we're also approaching that other human relations holiday. The pink and red heart-shaped decorations and the increasing displays of Valentine's candy and cards in the stores remind us of the importance of many key relationships in our lives.

Whether we're talking about spouses, lovers, friends, neighbors, classmates, co-workers, siblings, parents, children, teachers, doctors, sports teammates, church family, or the people who live in the inner city or in another country—human relations are vital to our well-being. Social relationships are so central to our humanity that we can hardly imagine surviving without them.

As we move into the year ahead, we know that we're going to face many opportunities and difficulties, and we'll depend a lot on other people to help us make the best of them. That's why I invite you this morning to reflect with me on the Genesis story of Jacob and Esau. Let's see how the biblical account of these two brothers can guide us in developing relational strength for life's challenges.

### **1—FLEE TO SAFETY!**

Genesis 33:1-17 is only a small part of the Jacob and Esau narrative. Their story actually goes all the way back to Genesis 25. The early years of those brothers were full of relationship *mistakes* from

which we could learn. But if we focus, instead, on what they did right, the first and most important piece of relationship advice we gain is, when in danger, flee to safety!

You may recall that Jacob had tricked his blind father Isaac and stolen the paternal blessing that was actually meant for his minutes-older twin brother Esau. When first-born Esau discovered what had happened, he immediately hated Jacob and began making plans to kill him. Consequently, their mother decided that Jacob should go far away and live with his Uncle Laban. They hurriedly worked out the details, and Jacob fled to safety.

It may seem counter-intuitive that one of the best things we can do to strengthen our relationships is to run away from them. But, sometimes, that's the truth. Sometimes, the only way to preserve our lives long enough to keep on having relationships is to flee from danger. Think of how it is when there's one of those domestic murder-suicide stories in the news. The reporters inevitably talk to the neighbors who will often say that the people in the house next door seemed to be just fine. Yet, apparently, there was such dysfunction and danger in the relationship that it ended in tragic deaths.

In case you struggle with this, let me be very clear: There is no marital, moral, biblical, church, or social code that requires us to remain in an unsafe relationship. If your life is in danger, if your children's lives are in danger—or conversely—if you are in danger of hurting someone else, the best thing you can do is flee. As awful and difficult as separation and divorce may seem, those are always better choices than abuse and murder. The only way we can develop strong relationships is if we are alive.

This need to flee from danger may also apply to relationships which are less fatal, but nevertheless life-harming and life-diminishing. The reason Jacob was returning to Esau in Genesis 33 was that the 20 years he had spent with his Uncle Laban had *also* taken a toll and had limited his potential. While Laban had not threatened to kill Jacob, he was extremely controlling, made promises he didn't keep, and had often prevented his nephew from leaving. Jacob had tried very hard to make

their relationship work, but he constantly felt cheated and oppressed. So, it was time now for Jacob to flee to a place of safety where he could fulfill the blessing his father Isaac had given him. It was time to develop relationships of healing and hope that would be life-giving instead of life-suffocating.

I know these situations and relationships are complicated. There's often more gray area than black and white. And, of course, we shouldn't give up on any important relationship without a lot of prayer, hard work, and maybe some counseling. But I want you to hear me say this: When we are in danger, or if we even think we might be in danger, we should absolutely flee to safety.

## **2—RECONCILIATION IS APPROPRIATE**

We see a second piece of advice in this story of Jacob and Esau. If we want to develop relationship strength for life's challenges, then there will also be times when reconciliation is the appropriate response. Fortunately, in most of our relationships, a simple apology and a quick act of forgiveness will get our relationships back on track. Sometimes, though, reconciliation is much more difficult. In those cases, we might need to follow some of the principles we see in this story of Jacob and Esau.

Notice that both brothers used **caution** in their approach to reconciliation. Genesis 33:1 says that Esau came toward Jacob with 400 men. That's a lot of caution. And chapter 32 indicates that Jacob smoothed the way for himself and his family by sending ahead messengers and servants to test the waters. If we've been hurt, or if there's any chance that we might get hurt, it's understandable and reasonable to take tiny and tentative steps toward reconciliation. If danger lurks, we can then quickly back out to safety.

Because relationships are so important to us human beings, however, we don't want to be forever fearful, paralyzed, and alone. So, if we cautiously deem a relationship safe enough to reconcile, then we will also want to consider Jacob's demonstration of a great deal of **humility and respect**.

Chapter 32 says that, with his servants, Jacob sent hundreds of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys

as gifts for his brother. Genesis doesn't indicate that Jacob actually ever said he was "sorry." But, by his gifts sent in advance and by much respectful bowing by his servants and family, Jacob certainly conveyed the message that he wanted to make humble amends for the harm he had caused his brother all those years before.

In turn, Esau's reconciling response to Jacob was characterized by **gracious forgiveness**. He said he didn't need or want the gifts of livestock. He was simply eager to have his brother restored to him. That says to me that Esau may have grown to admit his own part in the family rift. Those who are able to reconcile with forgiving grace are usually those who are willing to admit that they too have made mistakes—if not this one time, then in plenty of others.

Another factor in Jacob and Esau's reconciliation was their **individual development**. In the 20 years they were apart, they each had matured and figured out how to make a living for themselves. So they didn't need to be in competition or jealous of each other anymore. They could now reunite in peace. Time for healing and self-improvement may be necessary for us, as well. Then, when we are able and ready, reconciliation can be a great way to strengthen our relationships.

### **3—NEGOTIATE PACE AND SPACE**

Even in the best of situations, however, there's a third key to strengthening our relationships. We see this in Genesis 33:12-17. After Jacob had fled for safety, and then he and Esau met up and reconciled after all those years, they still had to negotiate pace and space.

In verse 12, Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you." Esau had missed his brother and was eager to become reacquainted. He wanted to spend time with him. Esau assumed that was the way to restore and strengthen their brotherly bond.

Jacob had a different idea. In verse 13, Jacob said that his children were frail and that he had to be careful not to herd his livestock too fast or they would die. Jacob suggested that Esau and his men go ahead, and that Jacob's group would travel at a slower pace. Then in verses 16 and 17, we see that

Jacob made another decision—to build his house in a different place than where Esau lived. Jacob apparently subscribed to the idea that fences make good neighbors—or, at least—that some space between them would be the best way to manage their sibling relationship.

Pace and space are some of the trickiest aspects of healthy and strong relationships. Pace is especially an issue when a romantic relationship or a friendship is just forming. How quickly do we want to become involved? Also, we have to ask ourselves: Am I a person who likes to arrive early, or am I always running just a couple minutes late? Am I a person who likes to be busy, hurrying from one task to another, or do I like to go slowly enough to smell the roses? Am I the early bird who gets the worm, or do I prefer to bring up the rear and turn off the lights? Do I have only one speed, or do I vary anywhere from zero to 60?

Space issues are also critical in relationships. Do we want to be physically close all the time? Or do we enjoy some time apart in our man caves or craft rooms? Extroverts, do you crave opportunities to be involved in community activities with lots of other people? Introverts, do you need space to be alone or with just one or two others at a time? Sometimes, due to job changes and military deployments, we may have to ask: How can our relationship survive extended periods of separation? When those long separations come to an end, the opposite situation is tested: How can we make our relationship work now that we're back together? Whoever we are, we tend to get along better with other people if we can master the pace and space of our relationships.

### **CONCLUSION**

When my husband Steve and I got married 37 ½ years ago, one of our wedding gifts was a framed hand-stitched needlepoint canvas. Wherever we've lived in all those years, that needlepoint has always hung on our bedroom wall. Besides our names and the date of our wedding, the needlepoint design has two rings interlocked around a cross. The woman who stitched that needlepoint knew, from her own personal experience, that the relationship of marriage between two persons can be tested to

the breaking point. So she wanted to emphasize that our marriage could be stronger if we would keep God and Christ at the center.

That same thing is true in all our relationships. And the word from God that we have heard today tells us that, when and if necessary, we should flee to safety. Other times, the appropriate response is reconciliation. And, even in the best of situations, we do well to negotiate pace and space. In this year of 2020, may God be our guide in developing relational strength for life's challenges.