

Memory, Mercy and Moving On

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Genesis 33:1-12

II Corinthians 1:23-2:11

“But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

“So now, instead, you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”

One of the most arresting statements made during the week I spent in Israel was made late at night as a few of us wrestled with the complexity of all that we had seen and heard. Undoubtedly it was one of the Christian in the crowd who brought up the impossibility and necessity of forgiveness if ever the peoples of this land were to live together. The thought prompted one of our Jewish colleagues to say that he did not know what we meant by the word forgiveness. “I don’t know what forgiveness is,” he said. “Ours is a community of memory, not forgiveness.” The words stunned me and have continued to remind me how little I understand about another’s way of seeing, believing, knowing, acting. Put another way, the words continue to underline how blithely I presume that my way of seeing, believing, knowing and acting is normative.

Once back in my study, I could not help but wonder if forgiveness were a distinctively Christian concept. When asked to summarize the contribution of each religion to the whole of human history, the great scholar of world religions Houston Smith had only one word for Christianity: forgiveness. That said, our common Scripture begins in the beginning and with the stories of the patriarchs whose tombs in Hebron were too dangerous for us to visit. Surely forgiveness among God’s people was to be found in these stories that are shared by Christians, Jews, and even, in part, by Muslims. I went to the Bible in search of such a story. Joseph and his brothers being too obvious an example, I paged back to the story I have always thought of as a story of forgiveness: the meeting of Esau and Jacob. You will remember that Esau was the oldest twin, the firstborn destined to receive Isaac’s blessing, but Rachael’s heart belonged to Jacob. When the time was right, she plotted with Jacob to trick blind old Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob, prompting Esau’s cry that has echoed down the bloody history of the world’s religions: “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!” Now Esau hated Jacob and vowed to kill him. Jacob ran for his life and lived in fear of what might happen if their paths should cross.

We pick up the story decades later. It is the morning after Jacob has wrestled with a stranger into the night for a blessing. Of that encounter, the now blessed, renamed and limping Israel declares, “I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.” It is also the morning of Jacob’s carefully orchestrated encounter with Esau. The scene anticipates the return of the prodigal, save that what Jacob sees down the road is his brother *with four hundred men*. Going ahead of his wives, his children and his servants, Jacob bows seven times on the way to the place where his brother stands watching. One imagines the scene in slow motion and silence. But suddenly, as I read the text, Esau comes running to meet his brother like the father running to meet the prodigal, embracing him, falling on his neck and kissing him. The brothers both weep. These two men estranged for a lifetime; these two tribes, I thought, letting bygones be bygones: here is forgiveness, mercy, grace. Esau meets

Jacob's family. Jacob offers presents to Esau, that he might find favor. Esau declines graciously, but Jacob insists saying, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor." Seeing God's image in the dreaded other? Incredible, I think. Finally Esau invites Jacob to walk with him: "Let us journey together and I will go alongside you." Jacob is all excuses, promising to meet Esau later in Seir. He never does, leaving me to suspect that a community of memory has heard a very different word in the 33rd of Genesis than my own community of forgiveness. I turn to the rabbis and to Midrashim for help. If I had doubts before, I am now certain that my way of seeing, believing, knowing and acting is anything but normative!

The midrash I find is a midrash on the phrase "and kissed him." Apparently the rule of interpretation is this: if, in Hebrew, the plain wording exceeds the dots, interpret the plain wording; if the dots exceed the plain wording, interpret the dotted letters. In the case of "and kissed him," plain wording and dots are equal. Says Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar, Esau kissed Jacob with all of his heart. Rabbi Jannai replies, "If that were so, there would be no reason for dots. Dots mean that Esau wanted to bite Jacob, but that Jacob's neck was turned to marble and Esau's teeth were blunted and bruised. Hence the words 'and they wept' reflect that Jacob wept because of his neck and Esau wept because of his teeth." According to another source, the dots are a graphic imprint of the bite itself! But I keep reading and learn that, throughout Jewish history, Esau has represented the hostile other. Even when Esau seems to act with nobility and forgiveness, the tradition does not buy it:

The struggle between Jacob and Esau took on, in Jewish tradition, the veneer of much more than just a sibling rivalry. The sages saw in the brothers a typological struggle not only between two political entities and ideologies but even more so a conflict between two competing civilizations. For them Jacob represented the people of Israel and Judaism, while Esau, after the demise of the historical nation—Edom, became associated with Rome and later Roman Christianity.

When Esau invites Jacob to walk with him, the sages hear Jacob's refusal in the light of their own experience. Esau had invited Jacob to share together this world and the world to come, realizing

that Jacob merited the world to come and wanted to latch on, so that he, too, would partake of it....The midrash reflects a reality where the sages felt that Rome (read: Christians) wanted to cling to the religious legacy of the Jews as the best route to redemption. This must have incensed the Jews who had suffered so grievously at the hands of the Romans who had stolen their sovereignty and robbed them of the ability to practice their religion free of Roman involvement. Consequently any attempts by 'Esau' to claim the mantle of the Jewish tradition could only be met with scorn since Roman oppression was indicative that it lacked the sincerity of true religion.

Ultimately," the article concludes, "God's truth will triumph." Two narratives. Two ways of seeing, believing, knowing, acting. One land. Politics, writes Donald Shriver in *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, is "how humans 'get along' with each other in spite of their conflicts...one of our most necessary and most fragile human achievements. From a million years back, we have been a fractious species. Fighting comes easily to us. But cooperation had to come too, or else we might not have survived our own combativeness."

According to Shriver, "Cherishing hope for revenge is one way sufferers of atrocity cope with their memories. But there is another way: the facing of still-rankling past

evils with first regard for the truth of what actually happened; with resistance to the lures of revenge [by means of forbearance which “opens the door toward a future that will not repeat the old crimes”]; with empathy—and no excusing—for all the agents and sufferers of the evil; and with real intent on the part of the sufferers to resume life alongside the evildoers or their political successor. This is the moral courage of forgiveness.”

I think of South Africa and Desmond Tutu, praying another like him will emerge in Northern Africa. “Our teachers,” continues Shriver, “have to be the sufferers themselves, the victims of colossal evil or those with the most right to represent them.” Elie Wiesel is such a teacher for me. “Jews,” he writes, “must never--and will never--forget the Jewish tragedy that marked the last century and will haunt all centuries to come. To forget would be a sin. To remember is essential; it is a worthy endeavor, a noble cause for which many of us have fought relentlessly. But does it justify intolerance? ...Hatred,” he concludes, “does not serve memory.”

There is another way to read this story, said a rabbi to his congregation. “Perhaps Jacob had to overcome his own anger and fear by recognizing the Divine Spark in his brother. His brother was not all wickedness, but a person like himself capable of *teshuvah* (repentance)...and forgiveness. For Jacob to be able to brave conciliation, he first had to make clear in his own heart and his own mind that his brother was not pure evil but rather a human being like himself [to see in him God’s face]....” Hate does not serve memory!

I think I know this personally, these days, more than I do politically. Therefore my first instinct in the hotel bar overlooking the old city of Jerusalem that night was to quit the political for the personal. “Think of your marriage,” I said. “No marriage can survive without forgiveness.” Still my new friend looked at me blankly. Since our conversation, I have been trying to imagine my own life without the attempt, however flawed, to forgive and without the humbling experience, however undeserved, of being forgiven. Absent forgiveness, I know my memories would be haunted by unresolved partings; my mind filled with the sort of conversations you keep having with yourself to convince yourself that you were right and the other wrong.

Yet when I asked a fellow Presbyterian if there were someone he could not imagine forgiving, he told me of his ongoing anger that will not let him forgive a wrong done to his son. I think now of parents whose child has been bullied or abused or violated by someone who had been trusted with that child’s one precious life. For a moment, forgiveness is unimaginable, and in that moment I multiply the children whose faces I know by hundreds of thousands of children, on both sides and from every tribe, over thousands of years. Forgiveness? I stare blankly. “My job is not to forgive—but to give meaning,” writes Sherri Mandell, the mother of Koby who was stoned to death at the age of thirteen outside their settlement in Tekoa

My job is to remember. I will remember that the rock of Jacob, my son Koby’s name, is another name for God, and that Jacob put rocks together as a pillow to dream on. A rock can be an instrument of rage or a symbol of God’s holiness. Even the name rock can be the name of God. Anything can be exploited for evil or sanctified for holiness....Koby’s death breaks my heart of stone so that my tears are an endless spring that soaks the ground and allows the seeds planted there to break through the darkness.

In the face of immense human brokenness, when the personal becomes political, we who call ourselves Christians confess our faith in the God whose Son has born the vengeful anger and the broken hearts of God’s warring children all the way to the

cross. The silence between the confession and the Kyrie of a Sunday morning can never be long enough for the righteously wronged to let go of the anger that separates, in favor of the grace that alone has the power to make all things new. Yet through the cross, I believe we have been given an imagination for forgiveness because we have been forgiven...while we were yet sinners. We have been taught the toll another's mercy toward us has taken on him, on her for the sake of a relationship neither was willing to quit. Moreover, we have been given the means of grace that invite us to lay our burdens down and begin again with someone who has wronged us. By his grace alone, I pray that this community may become, now and again, for the sake of the world God so loved, a community of memory and forgiveness; a community that, after remembering past sins rightly and the pain they have caused, are enabled to ask for forgiveness and forgive; to console and to be consoled, so that we may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Thanks be to God.