

Riverside United Church
November 24, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 33: 1-17

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, ‘Who are these with you?’ Jacob said, ‘The children whom God has graciously given your servant.’ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, ‘What do you mean by all this company that I met?’ Jacob answered, ‘To find favour with my lord.’ But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’ Jacob said, ‘No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.’ So he urged him, and he took it.

Then Esau said, ‘Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.’ But Jacob said to him, ‘My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.’

So Esau said, ‘Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.’ But he said, ‘Why should my lord be so kind to me?’ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

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John 21: 1-19

Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Our Money Story: #4 - Restore”

I have been having trouble this week with the focus word that concludes this sermon series on

Our Money Story. This theme and series comes from a resource from “A Sanctified Art” and it has been helpful in prompting me to think of dimensions of our money story - as individuals, as a congregation, as a society and world. The first three words were: “remember,” “release” and “reimagine.” Those generated ideas and sermons flowed out.

But this week, I have been having difficulty with the word “restore”. What in our money story needs restoring? The scripture lessons are great stories of restoring relationship and hope, but the economic angle on each of them seems pretty minor.

One of the stumbling blocks I am having is that restore seems to have a tone of nostalgia. I seem to have this phrase “make it great again” in my mind and that is bringing me grief. “Restore” seems to have that sense of going back to what was - and is that even possible?

The scripture readings for today are stories that fit the “restore” theme. And yet, the challenge I have been having is how these stories speak to our money story. So, let’s explore them together and see what might emerge.

In our Genesis reading, we hear the end of the story of the twins Jacob and Esau and how their relationship is restored after years of brokenness and separation. Esau was the first born and he would have been entitled to the family inheritance. Jacob tricked their father into getting it and so that would have been a great loss of money story for Esau. But, years have passed and from what we read in the story, Esau has done alright in spite of the loss of inherited privilege and status. Jacob’s life has been complicated and in one of the famous Jacob stories he spends a night wrestling with God, with his conscious and as a result decides to seek out Esau with repentance and hoping for reconciliation. He does so prepared for Esau’s anger. And he does that prepared to make an economic transaction to pay him back. But, the surprise and delight of the story is that Esau welcomes him with open arms and doesn’t accept his gifts. The relationship is restored - redeemed - reconciled.

So maybe one of the insights out of this story that may transcend time and situation is that not all challenges and brokenness can be solved by financial transactions. In our world, we tend to think that money can solve all disputes - What’s your price? - but there are some realities of brokenness that are more costly to restore because it means human dynamics of repentance and forgiveness that are needed for healing and restoration.

Within our lives, our families, our communities, our world, there are situations of brokenness and conflict that all the money in the world won’t solve until there is change of heart and a wrestling with different perspectives and narratives. And not all stories can have a fairy tale ending, but there still needs to be a sense of peace that is commitment to no longer causing harm

to one another.

The second scripture is one of the resurrection stories. These stories are written years later, and so the sense of despair and grief and anguish of the disciples and followers of Jesus can easily be underestimated in hearing the stories. Jesus has died. Now what? And then there are stories of hope and life being restored.

I have been confused as to why this story is part of a “our money story” theme. There is the dimension of fishing and the large net full of fish that would have been worth something - even if the former fishers didn’t choose to go back to their previous vocation. But, as I have been thinking about this story, maybe the truth within speaks to larger issues than money.

There is a restoration of hope and vision in this story. The disciples and followers of Jesus recognize that the presence and love of Jesus has not died, but is still alive, and that empowers them to continue their vocation as followers of Jesus.

One of the images that transcends the story is the experience of moving their nets to the other side of the boat. That shift makes all the difference. One of the realities of our story as a church and our money story as a church is that we live with the comfort and familiarity of how we have done church in the past. We know how to fish on that side of the boat. And yet, the nets of that side of the boat are not as productive as they once were. I resist the restore theme because all we might know and long for is to make church great again. Some of us know how many children used to be in Sunday School. I personally am amazed at how many churches claim to have had the largest Sunday School in the country in the 1960's! The 1950's and 60's were an exception in church history, not the norm.

One of the patterns that lingers is our expectation and teaching about giving money to the church. It is no longer understood by subsequent generations that it’s the natural or expected thing to do. This is a symptom of the decline in loyalty to institutions.

So, how do we fish on the other side of the boat? I don’t know. But, I know that becoming discouraged or looking back to imagined good old days is not the resurrection way.

On Thursday morning, I was having breakfast with some colleagues and we were having a good time. The server - whom we have had before - said to us, “do you work together?” And we said no, but we all have the same job. When she asked what the job was, one of the guys said we were circus clowns, and I think that she thought that might have been more believable than when we said that we were United Church ministers. We then had a brief conversation with her about church, and she could remember going when she was a kid, and enjoying it, but it was clear that

it wasn't part of her life now. She really didn't know what we did, but I think she was surprised that we were sharing so much laughter at the table.

I don't think the church will be restored to what it has been in the past, but that doesn't mean that I think the church will die. I think it will find new forms of expression, new ways and places to put down the nets - the nets of community, of connection, of dignity, of hope. We need to cast new conversations about the resources we need, including money, to survive and thrive as a community hub of activity and connection.

And so the challenge is to remember the generosity, to release the guilt and shame, to reimagine possibilities of grace and purpose, and to restore our sense of hope and commitment to be agents of reconciliation and peace.

Our money story will always be a part of our human story, our community story, our eternal story. If it gets lost from that framework, than we have moved into the worship of money. And so we can see all kinds of signs of how that is at work and diminishing lives and destroying community. And we are invited as individuals, as families, as a congregation, and beyond to find ways to find the balance of living with money as a resource, but not as a god. It takes money to be part of this economy, but there are other values and filters that also influence how we live faithfully and fully.

And so the challenge is to remember the generosity, to release the guilt and shame, to reimagine possibilities of grace and purpose, and to restore our sense of hope and commitment to be agents of reconciliation and peace. Amen.