

READ

Genesis 33:1-17

REFLECT

The time had finally come for Jacob and Esau to meet face to face after so many years. Jacob was scared to death, even separating his family so that his favorites (Rachel and Joseph) would be last in line, and therefore less likely to be injured if Esau and his men chose to attack. Jacob led the charge and began bowing before his brother in a show of humility. But Esau didn't respond like Jacob expected – instead of burning with fury, Esau embraced his brother with signs of love, leading them to both break down in tears of joy. Jacob introduced his family to Esau, noting that they had been gifts from God. In what can only be described as continued shock, Esau questioned the animals that had been sent before Jacob, which Jacob explained as a gift to help encourage kindness. But Esau didn't want animals, he claimed to have had enough as things stood. Jacob kept at it, though, using flattering words – even claiming that the kindness he'd received from Esau was like that of God – and Esau finally broke down and accepted the offer.

It seems as though that could have been the end of the story, the brothers were reunited with no ill will from a storied past, but Jacob refused Esau's offer to travel together. The only logical explanation of this is fear – Jacob still didn't think he deserved Esau's kindness and he didn't quite trust it yet. He was waiting for Esau's fiery anger to burn him once and for all. But it never came. He took his time getting to Seir, where Esau had been living, and when he arrived he built for himself temporary shelters and renamed the place Succoth for those temporary shelters (there's also a Jewish Holiday, name Sukkot, that remembers the temporary shelters the people of Israel lived in during their wilderness journey). Jacob's worst fears were never realized – the forgiveness he was offered was complete, even if he didn't deserve it.

REACT

- It's telling how Jacob feels about his family by how he arranges them as he gets ready to meet Esau and is afraid that Esau will extract revenge for his

stealing of Esau's blessing those many years before. How must it feel to know you are valued less than your siblings by your father? Have you ever felt less valued by people you love? How have you responded?

- When Jacob is face down on the ground in front of Esau you can almost feel his heart pounding and the beads of sweat dripping off his head – we've all been as scared as he was (or maybe not *quite* as scared, but we still know the feeling!). Think of one of those times when you felt as though something you did wrong was going to catch up to you. How were you feeling? Can you still access the dread that swept over you? When you finally faced the consequences of your actions, what was it like? Did you get what you thought you would, or was it different?
- Jacob was so overwhelmed by Esau's forgiveness that he couldn't believe it. Forgiveness, especially when we've done wrong, can do that. It doesn't feel real, like we're getting away with something and our punishment is just being delayed. What does it take to believe in the forgiveness offered to us – by loved ones and/or by God?

RESPOND

Learning to Forgive: Being forgiven is central to our faith – we profess it every single week in worship. We're less good at forgiving others, though, even though we're given so many stories of forgiveness in scripture, including Esau forgiving Jacob. Practicing forgiveness isn't just essential to our faith, it's good for our health – chronic anger, the kind of anger we hold onto when we refuse to forgive those who do us wrong, can lead to increases in our heart rate, blood pressure and can even create an immune response, thereby making us more at risk for heart disease and more. So how do we learn to forgive? Unfortunately, there's no one thing we can do, it just takes practice. Begin this week by choosing small acts to forgive that you might normally be angry at – someone cutting you off in traffic, for instance. Consciously choose to forgive that person, even if they don't know you've forgiven them (or that you were angry with them in the first place.) The more you practice, the easier big acts of forgiveness will become.