

I Go to Meet my Brother

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Genesis 33: 1-12

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Greg was a conman. He also happened to be my friend. At least I thought he was.

Greg and his wife double-dated with Debbie and me. We went to college together. We visited in one another's homes more times than I can remember. We knew each other's parents and siblings. For Pete's sake, we went to church together. I thought I knew Greg about as well as you could know anyone.

Suddenly, however, and completely out of the blue, we discovered that Greg was living a secret, parallel life. One day his wife returned home from work to discover that Greg had packed up all his belongings and left her. She called Debbie in shock. For days we heard nothing. Then bits and pieces of rumors and fragments of stories began to trickle in, giving us hints of a double life.

Just as suddenly, Greg reappeared. He showed up at his wife's door, and feigned reconciliation. What we didn't know was that he was doing this to position himself more favorably for a divorce which he knew was coming and his wife didn't. Soon, he left again, just before the divorce papers arrived. This time, he disappeared from all our lives completely, leaving us to pick up the pieces and wonder what had been real and what was phony.

This all happened over forty years ago, and we still don't know. A hole remains where a relationship should be. We don't really know who Greg was.

The section of Genesis that tells the story of Jacob leaves us in much the same place, only the one we don't really know happens to be a patriarch, a founding father of our faith. To reapply Sir Winston Churchill's description of Russia: Jacob is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. And most of the riddle, most of the mystery is self-made, the enigma of a con artist.

Dr. Kenneth Phifer, from this very pulpit, once described Jacob's story as the story of "self-seeking and self-aggrandizement." Jacob's life, Ken continues, was "graceless and crude, twisted by treachery. First he had cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright. Then he had defrauded Esau of their father's blessing.... Such chicanery was in keeping with the entire career of this man. He carried on his deceitful encounters with his father-in-law, Laban, over the years.... In short, Jacob was a schemer, a liar, a coward.... He was an opportunist and a sly deceiver."*

To know Jacob, in other words, was not to know him.

In Genesis chapter 33, we catch up with Jacob as he is returning to his homeland after years of exile. He is, in fact, on his way to meet his brother, Esau, for the first time in decades.

But, as the biblical text makes clear, even after his seeing the Lord face-to-face, we still don't know what it means to meet Jacob face-to-face.** As he rises from his restless bed of rocks, and limps forward to meet his brother, we wonder which face Jacob will present?

Esau we know. If you or I happened to meet Esau face-to-face we would know who he is by what he says and how he behaves. Esau remains as he ever was, straightforward and plain-dealing. He's really a sort of innocent in our story, but he has integrity.

On a vast plain, the story tells us, the two brothers meet. Jacob assumes he will be dealt with by power or cunning, because that's all he can imagine. We know Jacob is morally stunted, a man with a defective character, but we see now that his imagination is stunted too. A cheat assumes either that he will get away with cheating you or you will cheat him. That's all he can imagine. And, so, Jacob orchestrates the meeting to manipulate Esau, to buy him off, to quench his brother's wrath.

This time, however, Jacob's plots are in vain because his often-wronged brother, Esau, greets him with reconciliation, not with force, though Esau had a force of men at his disposal. Jacob never saw it coming. Esau meets Jacob with an embrace because he has already forgiven his brother.

We should note this, for what it is worth, even if it is beyond our understanding (and it is most certainly beyond mine): The cheated brother makes reconciliation possible. That's right. The cheater, however, can only make the reconciliation a reality in his own life if he is willing to be forgiven and to take responsibility for himself.

I noticed something else while studying this story.

Everybody, it seems, likes to comment on Jacob dreaming of a stairway to heaven, or Jacob wrestling with the angel. Everybody loves Jacob's limp, and Jacob's name change. But almost no one writes about the day Jacob's brother Esau rose above the damage done to him and says to his limping brother: *"Let us start on our journey, and I will proceed at your pace"* as the venerable Tanakh reads; Or, as the New Revised Standard translation reads: *"Then Esau said, 'Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.'"*

There are no words spoken in all the Bible that reflect more beautifully the character of mercy than these words. When the wronged brother is willing to slow his pace to walk beside the brother who deceived him, we witness a flesh and blood act of divine mercy, a sacrament of the God who comes alongside us, and every Jacob, and every Esau; God says to us: *"Let us go on our journey together, and I will walk alongside you at your own pace."*

Amen

*Kenneth G. Phifer, *Tales of Human Frailty and the Gentleness of God* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), "Story of a Stranger in the Night," p. 40.

**Edward Hirsch, "The Story of Jacob's Wrestling with an Angel," David Rosenberg, editor, *Genesis: Contemporary Writers on our First Stories* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 180.