

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

8th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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July 10, 2016

Text: Genesis 33:1-16

Title: “We Live. We Love. Face to Face”

I sat in my study in the basement at home at 1 p.m. on Friday. At the invitation of our Bishop, Deb Kiesey, I sat quietly for a few moments praying. Her emailed invitation read:

Please join me today at 1:00PM EDT/12:00 CDT in prayer and unity with those who will be gathering in Dallas for an interfaith prayer service. Please pray for all those who lost their lives in senseless acts of violence in Louisiana, Minnesota, Dallas and dozens of other cities across our nation.

I sat there...praying. Quiet for a while. Wondering in the midst of quiet prayer: “Lord, how will we move through this violence in our country? Lord, will we ever, ever, get past our inner suspicions and fears of one another as a result of differences in the human family? Lord, you created us this way. You made us—like the rainbow—different from one another and yet so full of promise. Lord, give us the strength and courage to overcome and become one as Jesus prayed in John 17:

²⁰ ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[1] so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’

Make us one, Lord. Make us one!”

I prayed, but like everyone else I also felt so sad, so perplexed, so torn, so –all kinds of feelings welling up within.

What do we do with each other in the midst of this disorienting time when good people are losing their lives, God’s beloved children losing their lives? What do we do with all this conflict and tension that we face together?

The story of Jacob and Esau is filled with conflict and tension. If you know the story or

have been here to hear it in this worship series you are well aware. Jacob has been unrestrained in stealing from his brother Esau. He used Esau's hunger and character flaws against him in stealing his brother's birthright for a bowl of soup. He used deception to fool his aged father, Isaac, in tricking him into giving his final blessing, something Isaac fully intended to give to Esau. He left home as a result of his brother's understandable anger toward him and spent 20 years or so in service to his mother's brother, Laban.

Then it was time to go home. God told Jacob to go home. On the way, he wrestles with God and no doubt with his own actions toward his brother. Because he thought Esau would still be angry with him--ready to kill him--as his entourage neared home, he sent messengers ahead to prepare Esau and hopefully soften his brother's heart, telling him that gifts are coming. The messengers returned to tell Jacob they had spoken with Esau and that 400 men were coming with him to meet Jacob.

That is not what Jacob wanted to hear. Sounded to him like Esau was bringing a small army. Sounded to him like it was time for revenge to be exacted. Sounded to him like he was going to get what he deserved. Four hundred men were coming with Esau, and I can't help but wonder if Jacob replayed his memory—maybe back to their birth—and remembered he wouldn't let go of his brother, remembered he stole the family birthright with a bowl of soup, remembered he lied to his father and stole Isaac's final blessing too. Jacob was a deceiving thief. Whatever Esau might be planning, Jacob had it coming.

I don't know if the Dallas shooter was thinking this way, but I can't help but wonder if the shooter believed the officers who were shot had it coming. Of course, they didn't. This wasn't personal against any specific officer. This appears to have been an act of enraged revenge against a group of people believed to hold prejudicial views of black people as a result of the deaths of two black men in Minnesota and Louisiana. Of course, it wasn't just the deaths of Mr. Sterling and Mr. Castille that prompted the shooting in Dallas. So, I can't help but wonder if Mr. Johnson, who authorities are now reporting took those officers' lives, believed they had it coming. Why else would such a horrific act have been committed?

Esau was coming with his small army of 400 toward Jacob and his small army of livestock and children and women and family. Like two fast moving trains headed toward each other on the same track, they were headed for a deadly collision.

When Jacob hears this news he feels fear. He is afraid. And he has a choice about how he handles his fear. We all do when it comes to fear. We have a slide that shows the anatomy of the brain. Way down at the base of the brain there is a portion of the brain called the amygdala. I've heard those more knowledgeable than me say it's about the size of a walnut. Some call it the reptilian brain because it is very primitive. It's the part of the brain dedicated to survival. So if something happens to someone that results in fear, it's the amygdala that gets the first crack at deciding what the person will do. Will it be fight to survive or flee to survive? Those are the two choices the amygdala offers.

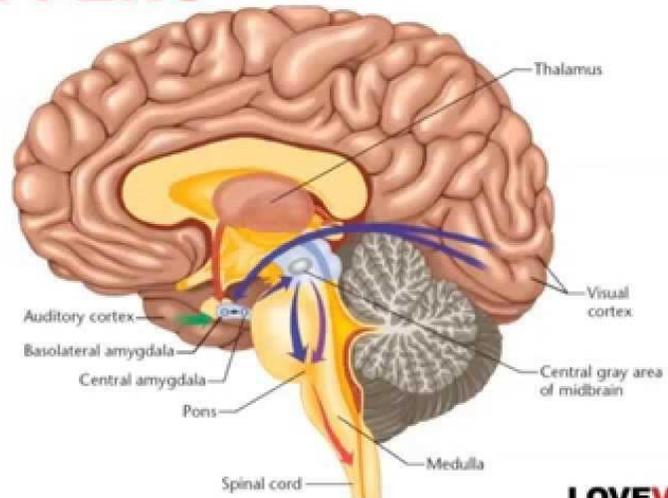
The largest part of the brain is called the neocortex. It's the thinking part of the brain. It's the rational part of the brain that gives us the capacity to mull things over, but it's slower than the amygdala. The amygdala wants a quick decision because it's designed to help us survive, but the neocortex is the place where wisdom is born and lives.

So if you're hiking through the woods and a dead oak tree snaps at the base and falls

toward you, we can be grateful to the amygdala for the evasive moves needed to save ourselves without thinking about it. We just do it.

HOW AMYGDALA HIJACKING HAPPENS

- The stimuli goes directly to thalamus and it then goes right to amygdala before a signal reaches the neocortex to process.
- This survival mechanism lets us react to things before the rational brain has time to mull things over.



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But if you're in Jacob's shoes and your brother is coming toward you with what you think is a small army, then the neocortex is needed to think through an appropriate response because this choice Jacob is about to make is crucial to the outcome.

If Jacob allowed the amygdala to govern his behavior he would respond with either fight or flight. If he chose fight, he could have gone to work building up his forces to fight Esau's small army and defend himself. He could have begun gathering or building weapons. He could have gone to the high ground and mounted a defense. Jacob could have chosen to fight.

He also could have chosen to turn around and head back to Laban's farm, back to his uncle's place and spent the rest of his life there. Jacob could have chosen flight in response to his fear.

One of the things that troubles me--and maybe you, too--about this whole matter of Black Lives Matter and the shooting of police officers in Dallas is that some seem to think that if you are a Black Lives Matter supporter then you do not support police officers. ON the other hand, if you strongly support police officers then you are against black people. As if these are our only choices. Why can't we love and support the black community and law enforcement? Why does it have to be a choice of one or the other? Can't we support, love, respect and appreciate officers and those who are different than we are? Why can't we embody Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John as he prays: *"²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[1] so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* Do we have to allow

the amygdala to tell us there are only two choices?

Jacob decides not to allow his reptilian brain to determine his fate. There is a third way and that is to face the threat he thinks is coming with humility and purpose. Jacob decides he will not fight and he will not flee. He will, instead, address his brother face to face. And so he begins to prepare by praying:

“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.¹¹ Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.¹² Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

Jacob begins with prayer, placing himself in God’s hands in the face of his fears. Our bishop’s request that we join her in prayer on Friday “for all those who lost their lives in senseless acts of violence in Louisiana, Minnesota, Dallas and dozens of other cities across our nation” was an invitation to place ourselves in God’s hands, that God might deliver us, too, from our fears.

So Jacob begins with prayer but then he also acts in accordance with his prayer. From his great wealth expressed in the size of his flocks he arranges gifts for his brother. Flocks of animals: 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 30 mother camels and their babies, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 males. All were arranged in their groups, each separated from the other so that when they made their way toward Esau it was like a Cornfest parade in the desert, each group receiving its own attention and applause. More than the animals, though, Jacob gave instructions to those tending the animals. They are to carry a message: “‘They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.’” Jacob comes in humility calling himself Esau’s servant and referring to Esau as his “Lord”.

And if that was not enough to appease his brother, when Jacob sees Esau and the wilderness dust of 400 men sending a cloud into the sky, he puts his family in order behind him and as they make their way toward Esau, Jacob stops along the way. He stops seven times and gets on the ground and bows toward Esau, each an act of repentance, so as Esau approaches there is no sword drawn in this frightful reunion. There is no threat of violence on Jacob’s part.

When they get close Esau breaks away from the 400 as he runs to meet his brother. It’s like the prodigal son’s father running to greet his youngest son come home after abusing his father’s good will. Esau and Jacob embrace and weep. Esau has forgiven his brother. Esau has let go of the justifiable anger he once held for Jacob. Esau has changed even as Jacob has changed.

After the family introductions were made, the meaning of Jacob’s gift changes, too. It was meant to appease an angry brother, but when it turns out the brother is no longer angry--when Jacob receives the forgiveness and grace of his brother--the gift turns into a gift of gratitude. Jacob insists that Esau keep the gifts because he is so grateful for the grace received.

What could have been a bloodbath in the dessert had Jacob allowed his amygdala to govern his response to fear turned into a glorious reunion of two brothers too long parted. And that is why Jacob told his brother:

...to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. ¹¹ Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.

The way we handle our fears makes all the difference, friends.

One of the great gifts of the “One Week, One Street” event--beyond the good that is done by helping people with their homes--is the building of relationships. This year I came to know Cynthia Baldwin-Ashford a lot better. Cynthia is a math teacher at Saginaw High School. In the aftermath of the shooting of Mr. Castille in Minnesota, she and I have been in dialogue via Facebook. It’s been a rich conversation about fear, about black and white, about the body of Christ. After the Dallas shootings, she wrote on her Facebook page:

When I was a young girl, one of my older brothers would reach behind 2 of our backs and hit us in such a way that we would go to war with each other. He would then stand back and laugh at the fight. One day I saw him in my peripheral and realized that he was the culprit. My fight changed! Hatred doesn't care about color. Difference is just one of the major avenues that Satan uses to divide and conquer!

The hatred that shot those officers in Dallas is just as wrong as the hatred that killed the two black men. Satan is throwing the rocks and hiding his hand. Wake up people, we have to see our common enemy and change our fight!

Accompanying her words, she posted this quote from MLK of which we have a slide:

“I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

· Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jacob and Esau testify to a third way to respond to perceived anger and bitterness. God has a better plan for us than what is happening. We can do better. We must do better with our suspicions and inner fears.

What can you do in all of this? What can I do? First pray as Jacob prayed asking God to deliver you and all of us from the fears that could result in real injury to people, ourselves included.

What can you do? “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Sometimes I wonder if we really believe what Jesus said about this and modeled for us from the cross when he asked God to forgive because they know not what they do.

What can you do? Be aware of your own inner fears and suspicions. Just because we perceive a threat from someone doesn't mean the inner fear is justified. Be careful about allowing the amygdala to overpower the neocortex.

What can you do? Be open to relationships with the Esaus, people you may perceive to be threatening. Consider meeting them face to face. You may after all see in them the face of God.

Maya Angelou offered a powerful image of being a rainbow in some else's clouds. I'd like to end with her reflections. (video clip).