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RECON ON RECONCILIATION

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Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him, accompanied by 400 men. Few scenes in the scripture in the Bible begin with more anxiety than this one. For years, Jacob's been running from the consequences of his actions. He deceived his father, he stole his brother's blessing, he shattered trust with his family, and Esau's anger became so intense that Jacob fled for his life. Right? You've heard this before? Maybe. Now after years away, Jacob is coming home. And there on the horizon is the brother he betrayed with his red flaming hair. With 400 men, Jacob assumes the worst.

Wouldn't we? As most of us know something about what it's like to approach a difficult conversation, carrying years of fear in it. We rehearse the arguments, we imagine the rejection, we construct entire futures around what might happen. We prepare ourselves for conflict before anyone has spoken a word. That's where Jacob finds himself in this moment.

And the night before, the story says he wrestles. The text says he wrestles with God, but it might as well have been him wrestling with his guilt, his fear, his memory and his responsibility. And by morning, the story says he is changed, not only exhausted by the wrestling, but his hip is out of joint, a symbol of his scar, maybe, his pain, and he limps toward the future carrying the marks of that struggle.

And then something remarkable happens. Instead of Jacob hiding behind his wives like most of the men in this room would do, or hiding behind his possessions, he walks ahead of them and he bows seven times as he approaches his brother, the magic number seven. He makes himself vulnerable actually, exposing his neck, his eyes down, which in the ancient world would mean that one blow of the sword would kill him. The position means he has stopped running. He shows his vulnerability. He has stopped pretending that he had all the answers, all the right moves. He steps into the truth.

And then Esau runs toward him, not to attack him, not to humiliate him, not to settle the score. Esau runs to embrace him. He throws his arms around his brother, kisses him on his vulnerable neck and the two men weep together. It's one of the most beautiful moments in Genesis, the book filled with anxiety and pain.

Jacob feared coming to his brother, but he receives this amend. Jacob says something extraordinary at that moment actually. He says, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." The face of God is not found in the temple, not found in a vision or some miracle. The face of God is discovered in the loving embrace of enemies, in the healing of a family estrangement in a moment that might be impossible for most of us to achieve.

Esau's compassion is sacred, and instead of reminding Jacob of his stolen lunch money and the time he jumped on him when he was in bed and twisted his arm, he loves him into this sacred encounter, where fear was expected and hostility was expected came holiness, something sacred in that embrace.

And the ancients are talking to us from afar about how fear remains one of the most powerful forces in human life in this story, how fear creates distance, hardens boundaries, convinces us that other people are threats before they are neighbors. We live in a time when fear is constantly being cultivated in us, whether we know it or not. We are encouraged to fear immigrants and political opponents and differing religions and different generations and different cultures. Every day someone is trying to convince us that our problems are caused by some other group.

Amy Chua in a book I love, called *Political Tribe* says, "When people feel threatened, they become more tribal. They close ranks. They become more suspicious, more defensive, more us versus them." None of us are immune to this. A great challenge in spiritual life right now may be overcoming the temptation to demonize one another. Does fear make us hostile?

Does it call us toward deeper understanding? Maybe both. Do we see enemies or do we see the possibility of encountering the sacred in another person? Maybe both. And Jacob and Esau's story is pointing to this. I found myself thinking about this recently because six years ago after my father's memorial service, a painful misunderstanding developed within my family, creating a fissure between especially my aunt and me. She stopped talking to me six years ago.

Then recently my son encouraged me to reach out to her. So when I saw a storm coming in to Cape Cod where she lives, I sent her a text, said, "Are you all right?" Before long, we agreed to have lunch. I planned it so that I would see her after my visit with Laurel, my predecessor in her nursing care unit. After the hour I spent with Laurel and her husband, I told them the story about why I was going off to lunch and Laurel said, like she did many times to me, "This is good." But I left with trepidation about meeting my aunt.

When she sat down at the restaurant where we were having lunch, the first thing she asked is, "Did you write the obituary?" You see, my dad's obituary had left her and her wife out. Where the family were listed, she was not named. The only sister to my father, a living connection to us and a real and troubling omission that hurt her, and at the time had upset her so much that she lurched out at me about it. I looked at my aunt having thought that she had blown up at me six years ago for something that I had said in my dad's eulogy, which was quoting him saying that his parents

weren't very good parents. And here we were six years later, the strife over the obituary. "Did you write the obituary, Daniel?" And I looked at her and I said, "No, my brother did it."

She immediately replied and said, "Oh, thank God I always loved you best." That was my aunt. We laughed. I owed her some apology from our family. Neither of us aware of any of the potential traumas that came from our family that had been wiped out by the Nazis where death was an important thing in our heritage, where being seen and named was important when we couldn't see or name those who were killed in their villages in the war.

My aunt and I had lunch for a couple hours and before she left, she said something incredibly wise to me. She said, "The hurt is still there, but I have let go of some of the pain."

The past wasn't erased, you see. The injury wasn't denied, but a door opened. A relationship that had been frozen for six years was thawing. As I drove back to Boston feeling lighter than when I arrived, I realized it wasn't because we had repaired the relationship, but we had begun a reconciliation, and dinner is planned for us in a month from now.

Now I want to be careful here in naming reconciliation out loud. I'm saying the word reconciliation because it's part of the framework for the theme year we are in, where truth, healing, reconciliation and transformation are the pillars that hold up this year. And I want to just say that reconciliation and forgiveness are not the same thing. Too often religious communities rush people toward reconciliation without paying attention to justice and accountability and safety, but true reconciliation is never a forced thing. As my friend, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, writes in her book, it's worth your time, it's called *On Repentance and Repair*.

She says, "Repair belongs to the one who caused the harm, but reconciliation belongs to the one who was harmed." That no one is obligated to restore a relationship that remains unsafe, that no one should be pressured to pretend wounds don't exist, that real reconciliation requires truth, it requires accountability, it requires change. And sometimes it becomes possible and sometimes it does not. But whenever it does happen, it is something precious and something holy.

And it's that because it reminds us that brokenness does not have to have the last word. All this with my aunt that was prompted by my son pushing us together was compounded by a film I saw last month recommended by Naomi Shihab Nye, who was here filling us with the poetic heart when she introduced me to her friend, Lekha Singh. Lekha is a filmmaker here in Dallas and she made a film called *Beyond Right and Wrong*, which I'm hoping we're going to screen in November.

One scene that I remember was almost unbelievable. Two Rwandan men were building a house together, tying pieces of wood to a frame to prepare for a plaster. The man who would live in that house had had his family killed for being a Tootsie by marauding Hutu neighbors. The man helping him build his house was the man who had murdered his family.

Every part of me as I watched this film wanted to ask, how is this even possible? How does a man whose family was killed work side by side with a man who wielded the knife? The story was repeated over and over through this film by different people. A man sought the forgiveness of a woman whose children were killed by him.

To even have the ability to approach her, to have the fortitude on both sides to engage seemed impossible to me. But their answer was not forgetting, not excusing. The answer wasn't pretending the past had never happened. The answer was a long process of truth telling, of accountability and repair and change, and the courage that was required to see the other human being, to see more than the worst thing they had done. The courage was required to imagine the future different from the past.

To get to reconciliation seemed a rare thing to me, but a powerful and holy thing. When it happens like that, it reveals something about human beings that says that we are capable of becoming more than we are. And I think the larger story of faith is really the story of reconciliation. Genesis begins with the vision of the world that is good and interconnected and whole, and then fear and violence and division fracture that wholeness, Cain and Abel, and Babel, and Noah and others, you know all those stories, and generation after generation, people are searching for ways to mend what has been broken before them that was embedded in their hearts and souls.

And that work, whether we call it God's work or the work of love or the creation of beloved community, the invitation is the same, to choose healing over division, to choose understanding over suspicion, to choose courage over fear.

I keep going back to Rainer Maria Rilke, who is one of my favorite poets and wrote this line that I love. It says, "Perhaps everything that frightens us is in the deepest essence something helpless that wants our love." Isn't that right? It's right for Jacob and Esau. It was right for me and my aunt. It is right for each one of us that has something that we fear about making something whole with another person.

For years, Jacob and Esau built up each other as monsters, but when they finally stopped running, they found not hatred, but an embrace, not vengeance, but tears, not an enemy, but a brother. And perhaps that is the invitation in this story, to stop running, to cross the distance that fear creates, to tell the truth about harm, to seek repair where repair is possible, to resist the voices that profit from keeping us divided, and to remember that whenever fear gives way to compassion, whenever strangers become neighbors, whenever dignity triumphs over suspicion, we catch a glimpse of something holy and sacred.

These words came to me this summer or fall. I can't even remember, but they relate back to that salad I had with my aunt and the poetry and reconciliation. These words came to me. I'm not going crazy. I'm not hearing words, but they did come to me, and their words are this. I wrote them down because it was so strong. It said, "What do you seek, my love? What do you seek? To be wrapped together in the arms of the fight or embraces of love?" To be wrapped in embrace of the fight or in the arms of love.

And all this reminds me of this address that I read an excerpt to you about this morning, that the bigger picture of reconciliation in our world starts in each of our hearts, extends to our communities and then countries and the world, and we're not going to get anywhere unless we start.

Timothy Eberhart said, and I would suggest, "Throwing off conquest theologies, supremacist spiritualities, colonial forms of governance and all their anti-democratic command and control

forms by seeking healing of our bodies, for our psyches, for our ancestors as we make just amend ceremonial offerings, if you will, in repentance of their sins and in recognition of the suffering they endured and passed on to others, by re-membering," he says, he uses a hyphen, "Re-membering and preserving the old knowledges, the indigenous wisdoms of every continent and how to dwell rightly, reverently in the land and by teaching them to our young people to give them hope. By doing all this and pursuing justice and peace worldwide, we together move into the spirit of the rainbow bridge of healing."

What do you seek, my love? The words in my heart and my ear? What do you seek, to be wrapped together in the arms of the fight or embraces of love? Not conquest theology here, not us versus them, however tempting that is, especially in the election cycle, but amends.

Reconciliation with those who need it, pain addressed, hurt released, maybe a way forward as we are dragged away toward division and the inflicting of more pain on one another. That is the way we see the face of God.

That is the way we clear up the wrongs, we build something together. That is the way toward reconciliation of hope in a fractured world. All we can do is try, small steps toward the ones who can receive us, and underlining can, for the good of all, for God's love, for the human adventure continues, my friends.

The human adventure continues in our quest ever to have life and to have it more abundantly. Amen and amen.