

COME HOME TO FAMILY!

Genesis 33:1-10

Advent offers opportunities for reconciliation and peace in families.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
December 8, 2019

Families operate in strange ways sometimes. Last week I read about an older couple who had retired to Phoenix (Arizona, not Avenue). On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the old man called his son, who lived in New York City, and announced to him, “I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing—45 years of misery is enough.”

“Pop, what are you talking about?” the son asked.

“We can't stand the sight of each other any longer,” the old man said. “We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Chicago and tell her.”

Frantic, the son called his sister, who exploded on the phone. “They're not getting divorced!” she shouted. “I'll take care of this!”

She called Phoenix immediately and screamed at her father, “You are NOT getting divorced! Don't do a single thing till I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing!”

The old man hung up the phone and turned to his wife. “Okay,” he said, “They're coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own fares. Now, what do we do for Christmas?”¹

What are we going to do about Christmas? When we decided to preach an Advent sermon series on the theme “Come Home for Christmas,” I knew I would need to do a sermon on family relationships during the holidays. You see it on TV, in movies, everywhere you turn. There is this Hallmark movie picture of the holidays that includes big, happy families all sharing quality time together with big smiles on their faces.

I wish it were so for everybody. But you and I both know it's not that way for many people. In fact, the holidays for many families are times of conflict, stress, and anything but fun. The reality is, the holidays bring increases in domestic disturbances, depression, substance abuse, and suicide. There's even a name for it in psychology; it's called “The Christmas Effect.”² Dr. Anthony Storr, a psychiatrist, wrote an article entitled, “Cheer Up; It's Soon Over,” and his advice was: “Remember that Christmas, although recurrent, doesn't last forever.”³

To get some insight, I suggest we look at the Bible's original dysfunctional family. It began with Abraham and Hagar and Sarah, was

passed on to Isaac and Rebekah, and reached epic proportions in the relationship between Jacob and his brother Esau. The story starts about Genesis 12, but we pick it up today at a critical point in chapter 33. Follow the example of our Biblical ancestors, and you, too, can learn how *not* to have a peaceful family.

First, play favorites. Isaac, the father, loved manly man Esau, and Rebekah, the mother, loved Jacob, who hung around the tents with the women. Love one another unequally and conditionally, and you can avoid peace forever in your home.

Second, play games. I'm not talking about a family interest in sports or cards; I'm talking about the emotional game-playing that so often happens in families. Manipulation, coercion, dishonesty, deceit, and a lack of integrity can ruin a family's chances for peace and reconciliation.

Jacob, whose name meant Conniver, tricked his brother Esau out of the two things that belonged to Esau as the firstborn of the two brothers: the birthright to a majority of the inheritance, and the last blessing of Isaac, their father. Jacob's game-playing split the family.

Third, treat strangers like family and family like strangers. In the ancient world of the Bible, hospitality was a sacred duty. A man would rather die than treat guests badly; they outdid themselves to make company feel welcome. Yet they seemed to have no problem being mean to their own family.

How many times have we fallen into that trap? We treat casual acquaintances better than we do our loved ones. We keep on a face of civility and hospitality until we get home, then the first thing our spouse or kids say that ticks us off, we explode with all the pent-up anger of the day.

These are wonderful ways to *avoid* peace and reconciliation with your family, and we can find them all practiced in the Bible.

But maybe your goal is different today. You would like to have peace in your home. You would like to reconcile with that family member that you've been at odds with for years. You'd like this holiday time to be a time when everyone could gather together and nobody say a cross word. You'd like to come home to family this Christmas. Then look at what

happened when Jacob and Esau came back together after 15 years of separation.

First, there was FORGIVENESS. Jacob had wronged his brother; Esau deserved to be angry at him. But when Jacob came back home after all those years, Esau greeted him with the embrace and kiss of forgiveness. Whatever was in the past didn't matter anymore. Jacob could see it in Esau's face; he said that seeing his brother was like seeing the face of God. It was that radiant. Their feud was over.

One of the most famous feuds in American history happened between two families, the Hatfields and the McCoys, in the Appalachian region along the border of Kentucky and West Virginia. The Hatfield-McCoy feud smoldered in the aftermath of the Civil War, because they were on different sides, but it ignited over a stolen hog into a bloody conflict. Before it was over 11 people were killed in the fighting. Most of the hostilities were over by the 1890's, but real peace did not come for over 100 years. On June 14, 2003, after 125 years of hatred, the infamous conflict finally ceased. Sixty descendants of the original clans gathered in Pikeville, Kentucky, to sign a peace treaty between the two families.

The document read, "We do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities, implied, inferred, and real, between the families, now and forevermore." Reo Hatfield, who first thought of the ceremony, said, "We're not saying you don't have to fight, because sometimes you do have to fight. But you don't have to fight forever." Both the governor of Kentucky and the governor of West Virginia were present for the nationally televised ceremony.⁴

Forgiveness can open up a doorway to reconciliation. Withholding forgiveness just eats us up inside as we become increasingly resentful and bitter over the hurts we have experienced. If you want peace and reconciliation in your family, forgive one another.

Second, there was RESPECT. Peace rules in families where each member is treated with respect. Jacob had disrespected Esau and his father Isaac by the tricks he pulled, but when the two brothers came back together, they offered one another generous gifts as a sign of respect and esteem.

Almost everybody is on the Mister Rogers fan bus these days, especially with the new movie out starring Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers. But Fred Rogers was an ordained pastor who lived and taught his Christian values through his show for children. One of the most profound acts of respect he ever did on his show took place in 1969. The civil rights movement had called American racism to account for the second-class status of African-American people, and there was a great deal of tension around race.

One week during the summer, Mister Rogers was soaking his feet in a little swimming pool, getting some relief from the heat. He invited the local police officer, Officer Clemmons, to soak his feet in the pool with him. The daring thing was that Fred Rogers had purposefully cast an African-American actor, Francois Clemmons, in the role. So there they sat, a white man and a black man, soaking their feet in a little swimming pool. When they took their feet out of the pool, Fred Rogers helped Office Clemmons dry his feet. Remind you of anything Jesus did?

Francois Clemmons played a recurrent role in *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* until the show closed in 2001. He didn't want to take the role at first, because the police were part of the problem in 1969. But the respect he received from Fred Rogers had a profound impact on Clemmons. On the very last show in 2001, Fred Rogers closed the show as he always did. He hung up his sweater and said, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are."

This time in particular, Rogers was looking right at Clemmons. After they wrapped, Fred walked over to Francois. Clemmons asked him, "Fred, were you talking to me?"

"Yes," Rogers said. "I have been talking to you for years, but you finally heard me today."

Years later, Francois Clemons recalled, "It was like telling me I'm OK as a human being. That was one of the most meaningful experiences I'd ever had."⁵

What if we quit worrying so much about buying the perfect present for our family members this Christmas, and we gave each one a gift of love and respect in abundance? Every single person, including every one in your family circle, is a child of God, made in the image of the Creator, loved

unconditionally by God, worthy of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Jesus loved that person enough to die for him or her; can't we give them a little credit? Every single individual has hopes and dreams and feelings and dignity. Even in the midst of disagreements or discipline, that needs to be affirmed. Nobody is worthless; nobody is insignificant; nobody deserves to be cast out of the circle of respect. Coming home at Christmas means respecting those who are at home with you.

Third, there was PATIENCE. Reconciliation doesn't happen overnight. Years of pain or resentment or conflict or dysfunctional relationships cannot be undone this Christmas. Steps can be made, but problems don't build up in a day, and they won't go away in a day either. Jacob was estranged from his brother for 15 years. You have to be patient.

The Straight Story is a movie based on a true story of two brothers in their 70's named Alvin and Lyle Straight. They were mad at each other and hadn't spoken in ten years. Then Lyle had a stroke, and Alvin decided he had better go see him and try to make things right before it was too late. Unfortunately, Alvin's eyesight was so bad, his driver's license had been revoked, and they had no other family. So Alvin took off on his rusty John Deere riding lawnmower, with his supplies in a homemade trailer behind him. The trip was 500 miles and took him six weeks.

At one point Alvin camped in a cemetery, and the pastor of a church next door brought him food. They got into a conversation, and Alvin recalled how he and Lyle had been very close growing up, sleeping out and talking until late at night. The pastor asked, "Whatever happened between you two?"

Alvin's eyes teared up as he explained, "The story's as old as Cain and Abel (or Jacob and Esau). Anger. Vanity. Mix that together with liquor, and you've got two brothers who haven't spoken in ten years." After a moment of grieving silence, he added, "Whatever it was that made me and Lyle so mad, it doesn't matter anymore. I want to make peace and sit with him and look up at the stars like we used to do."

After six weeks on the riding mower, Alvin reached the dilapidated wooden shack that belonged to his brother Lyle. He stood outside and

called, “Lyle? Lyle?” No answer. Maybe he was too late, and Lyle had died while he had been on the road.

After a lengthy pause, a voice from inside the shack called, “Alvin? Alvin?” Lyle appeared at the front door holding onto a walker. He invited Alvin to come onto the porch, where they sat in silence for a long time. Alvin nervously looked at his brother, while Lyle studied the riding mower and makeshift trailer. Obviously overcome with emotion and gratitude, his eyes puddled as he asked, “You came all this way on that...just to see me?”

Alvin's face twitched, betraying his emotion. His eyes, too, were tearful. He smiled and simply said, “I did, Lyle!” After ten years of silence, those simple words were a symphony of reconciliation and forgiveness.⁶

Advent offers opportunities for reconciliation and peace in our families. I know not every situation will work out. Not every marriage will be healed. Not every relationship will become close. Not everyone will play. That’s OK; we don’t live in a perfect world. But even in situations where everything does not work out in a picture-perfect manner, we can hope for peace. We can hope for reconciliation. We can hope for acceptance without bitterness. It *can* happen.

Reconciliation is possible because of God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ. Christmas is a move on God’s part to reconcile the world to himself and to each other. The mission of Jesus is to bring us all—broken hearts, broken lives, broken creation—back together again.

The first step toward peace and reconciliation in your family is to have peace and reconciliation with God. Embrace the grace God gives to us in Jesus Christ. Have you done that? It’s very simple. Repent of your sins; confess them before God; receive God’s forgiveness. Surrender your life and your will to God and promise to follow Jesus in the way you live.

Then you can forgive others who have hurt you. You can respect one another, because you have the self-respect of knowing that you, too, are a child of God. You can be patient, because you know how patient God was—and is!—with you, and you know that our lives and our families are ultimately in God’s almighty hand.

Advent offers opportunities to find reconciliation and peace in our families. First be reconciled to God, then take steps with those you love. It

can begin today. If Jacob and Esau can embrace, if the Hatfields and McCoys can call off their feud, if an old man can ride a lawn mower for six weeks to sit on the porch with his brother, maybe you can give it a shot. God will help you. That's why God sent Jesus, after all—to reconcile and make new, to bring peace on earth, good will to all people. You do have hope, because this Christmas you can come home to family!

¹ *PreachingToday.com*.

² Randy A. Sansone and Lori A. Sansone, "The Christmas Effect on Psychopathology," <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3257984/>.

³ Nicky Gumbel, *Why Christmas?* (New York: Alpha North America, 1997), p. 5.

⁴ Stephen Leon Alligood, "American Profile," CBS News.com, June 14, 2003.

⁵ David Zahl, "Week in Review," *Mockingbird* blog, March 11, 2016.

⁶ "The Straight Story" (Disney, 1999), written by John Roach II and Mary Sweeney, directed by David Lynch.