

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Across the Lines: Blessed Are The Peacemakers
Genesis 27:27-45, Matthew 5:9

My wife Laura often asks, "How did it go?" Last night after the sermon, I said it felt different. It felt like a different kind of service, a different kind of sermon. We started the series last week with Noel Castellanos from CCDA [Christian Community Development Association] talking about what it would look like for communities to be transformed if we went *across the lines*. I said that I felt like I had a different word that I was supposed to speak, a different kind of message. Laura said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, it started out with Jesus teaching." I don't know if you remember the very first time they collect the sayings and teachings of Jesus. It is called the Sermon on the Mount, His masterpiece sermon. Do you remember how that starts? Jesus doesn't start by saying, "Oh, you're in trouble." He starts by saying, "Bless you." The blessings are called the Beatitudes,

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. **5** Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth [Matthew 5:4-5].

And my favorite of all,

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God [Matthew 5:9].

Somehow we wanted to talk about how we are most like the children of God when we do not agree, when we are banging up against each other and hurting each other. How do we flesh out being peacemakers? We talked about this as peacemakers being called to cross the lines. Whether you are at school or at work or at home, you are supposed to go *toward* the places of tension and live in the tension. Being a peacemaker is staying around when you disagree so this will be a different kind of word. It will either end up being a lecture, "This is how you do it," or it could be that God wants it to be personal for you. It could be that God has some *one* or some group of people that He wants you to hear a word about.

I'd like you to think of somebody you are uncomfortable with because you disagree so much. They say black, you say white. They say here, you say no. This is the person you do not want to be seated next to at Thanksgiving. At the service last night, I asked them to give me some examples of how we are divided and angry as a society, as a people. They started out sort of slow and then somebody said, "Well, you know, you look at politics, and POW! You look at the fights about abortion. You don't have space for people on the other side of that issue. Or affirmative action divides us." Or last week we talked about immigration and somebody said, "Well, just as hard as it is to be friends with those kids who are *fill in the blank*, the jocks, the nerds, the kids who dress differently and stand at door No. 6 by themselves and nobody wants to go near them, would you cross the lines to be near them?"

We are a society divided by denomination. We see that in the Middle East but it happens between generations, doesn't it? Some of you don't have much to say for those old people. Some of you *are* those old people and you don't want to have much to do with those *other* people. We have a society where it is hard to even have a civil discussion when things go terribly wrong. Think about the conversations we have or have not had about guns since Sandy Hook. It is tough to be a peacemaker. It is tough to live in the tension with the people you disagree with and it needs to be personal.

I think one of the reasons, hard as it is to believe, is that we don't agree completely about sex in our society. Straight sex, gay sex, no sex, whatever, sexuality is a problem in our society, and somehow it divides us. I was with a friend who has been a friend for more than 15 years. Our children have gone on trips. We have gone on mission trips together. We are having lunch over at Crave because she is so concerned that the discussion and the stance we take about gay marriage or gay ordination will tear the church apart. She is in tears looking at me, saying, "Do you want *this* to be your legacy?" And she stopped attending because we are so divided on this. It's personal for me and, I bet, for *you*.

Yesterday afternoon I'm in a line at the store, getting ready for this sermon and I get a text message from Rabbi Norm Cohen over at Bet Shalom. He says, "I know this is the last thing you want to hear but they're at it again" and by *they*, he means *those Presbyterians* and I'm one of *those Presbyterians*. We are divided in the way that we deal with Israel and Palestine and there is this huge conflagration between Jews and Presbyterians in the States. He wanted to say, "Can you and I step into the middle of this?"

I think we need to step into the middle of this. I think this church, this particular church especially, needs to hear how we can live in the tension, how we can cross the lines, and I say this because we are different from some other churches. I know some churches that are great churches, churches where 90 percent of them vote Republican and are sure that Jesus will not come back to the Democrats. And there are other churches that look at those people and say, "They are proselytes. They don't understand. If they would just vote Democrat, if they would just love Jesus the way that we do," and those churches tend to be monolithic and unified. You don't last long in one of those churches if you don't agree with them. That tends not to be the case here. We are all over the map on a variety of issues. Most of you are crazy about most of those issues but we love Jesus enough here that we want to stay together. That means that we need to learn to be peacemakers. We need to learn the lessons of what have *not* been learned in the Middle East.

In the history of the Middle East, there is the age-old conflict between the children of Jacob, the tribes of Israel, and the children of Esau, outside of the children of Israel. The conflict between the Jews and what have become the Muslims, between the children of Jacob and the children of Esau that Jody Phenow tried to tell the children about. Listen to that story.

Late in his life, unbelievably, Abraham has a baby with Sarah. The kid is born so late in their lives that the parents call him Isaac because Isaac means *what a joke, it's laughter*. Then Isaac grows up and marries and has twins. The twins come out, Esau first and then Jacob. Right from the start, Jacob is literally holding onto his brother's heel as he is being pulled out of the body of their mother. And for all of their lives, the brothers fight.

34 When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me—too, my father!" **35** But he **[Isaac] said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing."** **36** Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob?"

Jacob means the trickster or the grabber.

This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Then he asked, "Haven't you reserved any blessing for me [Genesis 27:34-36]?"

41 Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near;

"My dad's going to die soon."

then **I will kill my brother Jacob** [Genesis 27:41].

Hearing that, Jacob fled and as Jody reminded us, 15 years at least pass while Jacob, far from home, becomes a wealthy patriarch. Esau at home becomes wealthy too, but Jacob gains his fortune by his wits and his cunning and his guile, his trickery.

9 Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, **LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives,**

This idea of crossing the lines is not Jacob's idea. God has spoken into his life, saying, "Go home,

and I will make you prosper [Genesis 32:9].'

Jacob said,

11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me Genesis 32:11].

But he heads home. He sends his clan in front of him divided into groups.

17 He instructed the one in the lead: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?' **18** then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us [Genesis 32:17-18.'"

21 So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him,

hoping that they will almost serve as bribes and tame down the anger of Esau,

but he himself spent the night in the camp [Genesis 32:21].

Jacob is left alone the night before he is supposed to meet his brother but instead of falling asleep, he has an encounter with another person. He doesn't realize this is an angel, a representative of God.

24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. **26** Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go

Jacob being the grabber,

unless you bless me [Genesis 32:24-26]."

29Then he blessed him there. **30** So Jacob called the place Peniel,

meaning "face of God" because it was where God touched the tendon of his hip and caused it to be thrown out of its socket, dislocated,

saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared [Genesis 32:29-30]."

The angel let go and he gets up with a brand new limp.

1 Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants [Genesis 33:1].

3 He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. **4** But **Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him**; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept [Genesis 33:3-4].

8 Esau asked, "What do you mean by all these flocks and herds I met [Genesis 33:8]?"

And Jacob said,

10 "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably [Genesis 33:10].

The same thing he just said the night before. "I've seen the face of God and I'm still alive." Now he sees his enemy, his brother, and says, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

27 Jacob came home to his father Isaac in Mamre . . . (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. **28** Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. **29** **And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him** [Genesis 35:27-28].

They buried him together. That's the story of the founding of Israel and the nations surrounding it and the children of Esau. It's supposed to be a happy story. It's the story of how the Middle East was born in a quarrel and came to a place of blessing. If only the story could have stopped there. But the peace, the embrace, has broken down and now the children of Esau strap bombs to their bodies and blow themselves up, and the children of Jacob are an occupying army that

literally builds walls so that the fathers of the children of Esau and the children of Jacob can't get together anymore. There is war and there is no peace. It was such a moment there.

We'll come back to that at the end because I believe that just like in the Middle East, you and I live in a world where we hurt each other, where accidentally sometimes or thoughtlessly we hurt one another deeply and those wounds break our relationships. Without the ability to live in the tension, without the ability to cross the lines so that we make up, terrible things happen. If we cannot see ourselves as sisters and brothers, as beloved children of God, we end up in Rwanda. We end up in drive-by shootings in Los Angeles. We end up afraid to go five miles from our homes because the people look different than we do, and there is a price to pay.

I saw a part of that price just recently. On Tuesday mornings Jody and Rich Phenow lead the pastors in a review of who is sick, who is in the hospital, and who we should visit. A couple or three weeks ago Rich talked about the family of a guy who was very sick, who had been very involved in our church and had faded away to another community. We had tried to visit him this summer but he made very clear that he was taken care of. "Thank you. I've got *my* church now." I said in that mothering, wonderful way that pastors have, "Well, I'll pray for him." I'm not going to go *talk* to him. But then I said, "Well, I probably ought to call the family." Rich said that would be a good idea so the next day or the day after, I had a hole in my schedule where I couldn't think of anything else to do and, trust me, I tried. I couldn't think of anything else to do and I ended up driving over to the hospital and going into this guy's hospital room. He was there, looking like death warmed over, literally. His son was there and a good friend and we spent an hour together. For the first time in over ten years, I turned to him and said, "You know, you need to hear from me how much of a difference you've made. You need to hear how what you have done has made a huge difference in my life and in the lives of so many others." He just sat there and listened, and I prayed and left. As I left I thought, my discomfort has kept me away from this guy for ten years. How could that have happened? My pride has stopped me from reaching out for over ten years.

Could I have gotten to this guy earlier before it was his deathbed? Could you? You know who I'm talking about. You know who it is in your life. Are you ready to cross the lines? Is it a child? Is it somebody in school? Is it a whole group of people? Is it somebody at work? Do you have these broken relationships? I know you do because I look in the mirror, and I do as well. I want to talk to you and say that the children of Jesus are the peacemakers. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." They are on the journey of reconciliation.

It is a journey. This crossing the lines thing is a journey. It starts out with something going wrong and a division that happens, a division that sets people apart. It's either personal, and they just need to be away from each other, this is not always bad, or sometimes you both just need a little time to cool off. The problem is, things don't cool off. They harden. They get cold and we become isolated from each other. Do you know that the reality is that most Israelis in Tel Aviv have never met a Palestinian? Most Palestinians in Ramallah or in Bethlehem have never had a conversation with a Jew because separation isolates us, and then communication breaks down. You can stay like that for what feels like forever and it only gets worse, but then something happens. Sometimes something bad happens. Somebody gets sick and you go, "Oh, I need to go there and talk to her but if I go there, then *he'll* be there and what are we going to do." Something bad happens and you feel like, "Oh, this can't go on." Or something good happens. Something in you stirs and says, "I should be the bigger person. I should do something about this."

I don't know which of these is the case with Jacob and Esau, but at some point, God spoke to Jacob. God reminded him of who he was. "Jacob, you are My beloved child and so is Esau. Go home." That is what reconciliation is. That is what crossing the lines is. Crossing the lines is the long way to go home. "Go home," says God, "and make peace." Peace is not for cowards. There is nothing human about Jesus' command to love our enemies. We are called to follow a different path home because we are the ones who have seen God and lived. We have seen God in the person of Jesus Christ and He has said to us, "Love your enemies."

So you are the one, not the other person. They are wrong, let's face it. I agree with you. They are wrong. They hurt you. It was a misunderstanding but God is speaking to *you* this morning and saying, "You are to take the initiative. You are to go home because the other person is paralyzed and cannot go home." It was said that there was no way any Jew could ever start the peace between Israel and Egypt. It could only happen because Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian, *called* Menachem Begin. Someone had to go first.

The next step I learned from the story of Esau and Jacob is that the only reason Jacob is going home is because God told him and on his way, he is a changed person. He has spent his whole life getting and getting and getting and winning and winning and winning and running and running and running. On his way back, God makes Jacob humble. God caused him to walk the rest of his life with a limp.

I don't know who is wrong or most wrong in this attitude that you have, whether it is toward a race of people or a gender of people, whether it is toward a person or an issue, but do you walk with a limp in humility or are you right? Are you always right? People who are always right are always right but they are rarely reconciled. Jacob limps home in humility and as he does, his encounter with Esau is different because he is not trying to win the fight. He is trying to show his new spirit. In humility he is for once not trying to get the biggest piece of meat but to be generous. He has sent gift after gift after gift and said, "Look what God has given me. Let me share." He has been generous. He has been honoring.

When you and I are trying to reconcile, it is not a great strategy to start out with how the other person is wrong. It is not helpful to talk about how you were right. The humble child of God is generous and honors the other person. The humble child of God finds a way to be generous with the other person and says in different words, "It is so good to see you. To see you is to see the face of God." "Last night God spoke to me," said Jacob, "and I didn't die. I saw the face of God, and I've seen the face of God again in you. I honor you." How do we see the face of God in the person that we are called to be reconciled to? This is not romantic. This is not love your enemies and then get away from them. This is somehow saying, "There is a child of God locked inside that person. How can I reach out instead of keeping score?"

So two distant people have been separated and not talked and God nudges one of them to walk back. That person gets humbled and limps back and in humility, reaches out and instead of trying to win the fight becomes generous and honoring and they hug. Wouldn't you love to end the story that way? That's where it *starts*. That's where crossing the lines and living in the tension starts.

We could have called this whole series *living in the tension* because on Sunday nights once a month here, we have a group of people, who are gay Christians, not often comfortable in the

church, who have been hurt by things that the people of God have said about being gay and being Christian. They come here and meet with another group of people, who are also followers of Jesus, not convinced that gay, same sex relationships are what God wants. They meet together. They are not trying to fight. They are not trying to debate. They are trying to hear each other's stories. They are trying to listen so that they can live in the tension, so that they can be the children of God. Living in the tension is where real humility and real generosity and real listening begin. It's about grace.

I said I wanted to end with the story of the Middle East, not the story of the Middle East where it starts with the fight between Jacob and Esau and not the story of the Middle East where Jacob and Esau hug and everything is fine and not the story of the Middle East that's in flames today. I wanted to show you what happens when the children of Jacob and the children of Esau hear the commands of Jesus.

[Video shown.]

"Blessed are the Peacemakers", for they will be called the children of God. As you think of that strained relationship, let's pray together...

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.