

I think that for us to understand this scripture, we need to review what happened since the birth of Esau and Jacob. Their parents were Isaac and Rebekah. Esau and Jacob were twins: Esau was the first born, red and hairy; grew up to be a rough country boy, a hunter of animals; Jacob was born holding onto the heel of his brother. He was quiet and stayed at home, the opposite of Esau. Isaac loved Esau. Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once, as youth, Esau came in from hunting and was so hungry he asked his brother Jacob for some of the stew he was cooking. Jacob replied he would give him the stew only if Esau sold his birthright to him. And Esau did. Then another time, When Esau was out hunting again, Jacob and his mother devised a plan to get Isaac's blessing before he died for Jacob, and not for the eldest son, Esau.

Both grow up and are successful in their own right. But Jacob hears that Esau is coming to see him, with 400 men. And so Jacob sent hundreds of his flocks to Esau as a goodwill gesture, to pave a road to peace, he hopes. That's the backdrop of our story today. We hear the sibling rivalry. Family dynamics are so persnickety! READ Scripture here!

Last week Pastor Larry mentioned that we, the church, live out Christ's command to love one another, through community. Last week's theme was about serving. Today, we'll talk about welcoming, as a part of *a loving, beloved community*. As we welcome others into our church family, we welcome others to

serve alongside us. Pastor Larry asked us, if we're not *serv*ing others, and I'll add for today, if we're not *welcom*ing others into relationship with us and the church, then, are we truly participating in the beloved community?

When I think of welcoming in the Bible - biblical hospitality - I think first about the scripture passage from Hebrews 13:2 "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

In Biblical times the history of hospitality is long indeed. It was the custom to welcome strangers into your town or village and then invited them into your home. You washed their feet, fed them, gave them drink and a night of rest, and then sent them on their way. You shared what you had with others.

It's ironic that hospitality, or lack thereof, is also the background for the birth of Jesus Christ – his parents not welcomed in Bethlehem – no room for them – thus the manger becomes the ground floor for God's reconciling work in the world through his son.

To be hospitable was a sign of being civilized in the Greek world. Today, thousands of years later, it seems to me, that we might be less civilized than our ancestors. Just listen to the politicians talk about each other. Even the TV news media seems less objective than ever.

For the ancient Romans, to entertain strangers was a sacred duty. During the Depression years in America thousands of people met strangers on their front or back porches and gave them food, water and sometimes shelter or other means to survive. That spirit of community seems to have vanished these days.

Yes – we do *serve* others through our church community.

Yes – we are friendly folks who *welcome* and care for others.

But, is there something missing in our community? Do we really welcome all, including our enemies - those who've hurt us – those we're afraid of? I, for one, know the difficulty in welcoming those who don't look or talk like me. I know the difficulty in reconciling with others – especially immediate family members.

**I have learned the value of receiving others different than me.**

**I have learned that reconciliation is a powerful tool; a gift God gives us to help us in relationships.**

**I have also learned that if I don't reconcile with my own family first, then I have a much harder time reconciling with others.**

For some people it seems natural for them to be a host. They just brighten up when sharing with others. They make guests feel welcome and at home. When we host family and friends we welcome them by our own traditions. We may greet with a handshake - a big embrace. Perhaps we even greet with a kiss or two.

But for some of us, it isn't easy to welcome others. We struggle to share and be generous. We especially struggle sharing with those who have hurt us in the past, or with those we don't understand.

Perhaps the hardest thing for any of us – is to accept a gift from someone we are unhappy with. Esau accepted the gift of Jacob's flocks but he had to be asked several times. He said he had enough. He didn't need any more. He wanted Jacob to keep what was his; quite the opposite of how Jacob had treated his brother years before. What might we be refusing to accept from others? How might we be hurting them by our refusal of their gift?

How do we build community and relationships when we've been hurt – harbor resentment – have disagreement? Esau had legitimate reason to blame Jacob for much. Jacob had legitimate reasons to fear his older twin for what he had perpetrated on him.

Jacob hears that Esau is on his way to meet him with his 400 men. I think Jacob is afraid. He hopes Esau will receive him favorably. Of all people, Esau sought reconciliation. He welcomes his younger brother Jacob by running to greet him. Then, Esau embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him, and they weep together. Tears of joy run down their cheeks at this meeting. When reconciliation

happens in our lives, the tears of joy also flow freely. It is healing. It is sacred. It is God working through us to build community.

Jacob seems surprised by his brother's reaction. Jacob believed that in his brother's embrace, he, Jacob saw God's face. When we welcome others; entertain them; greet, host, and receive them, then we find ourselves in the presence of God; we experience a face-to-face encounter with God when we welcome others. That's how Jacob feels after Esau greets him so warmly.

Extending hospitality was not a courtesy but an obligation in biblical times. It would be great to get aback to that sense of obligation – not that we invite others or welcome them because it's nice (which it is) but because God calls us to do just that.

In Israel political boundaries and alliances changed often. Values and beliefs clashed. People felt the tension in their social lives – all a threat to the essence of community. This occurs today too. The latest gun violence raises the level of social tension in America. Terrorism within our cities raises the social tension more. Tension was in the early church too at Pentecost. Many didn't understand what was happening. There is always tension – always misunderstandings – always a pulling apart the fabric of community.

Strangers and those we fear or those who have hurt us pose a danger to us. They bring tension to our lives and **we don't like it!** Yet, in the Bible, strangers

were routinely welcomed, made to be guests and most likely left as friends – not as strangers.

Jesus' life chronicles hospitality. Mary and Martha received Jesus at their home. Jesus invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus. In Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus gives the key to entering the kingdom of heaven – hospitality – when he said, “For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you *welcomed* me.”

Esau asked Jacob, “Who are these with you?” Jacob gladly answers, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant.” I believe this is the key to our passage. “Who are these with you? With us?” Whom has God given to us to embrace, to host, to reconcile with, to welcome into the church community?

**Our response has to be the same as Jacob's; they are “the children God has graciously given to us, the servants of God.”**

God has gifted you and me with people in our lives - and those we haven't even met yet - to welcome and receive – to be host to them – to embrace them.

When someone receives us – welcomes us – shows us hospitality – they are providing a **divine gift of community**. And in welcoming others, in reconciliation with family, we see God at work – we see the face of God. Hospitality, welcoming was a key component to the early church and is still central to our community today. Amen.