

“Hope”
By Adam H. Fronczek

Many of you know that in preparation for today’s sermon, I asked for emails and letters reacting to the election—not just the results but the unusually divisive season we’ve just experienced. We’ve witnessed uncivil and violent words and deeds; things we don’t want to pass on to our children. People are scared and struggling, and some have been for a long time. I want to begin this morning with a word of thanks; about 75 of you sent thoughtful, faithful responses that have helped me to know you in a deeper way. We are a diverse congregation. At a time where there is a lot of fear out there that people of differing viewpoints aren’t talking to one another, I think our presence here together is something to celebrate. And I hope that as we live into the next season of our life together you’ll remember and value the diversity of our community in your coffee hour conversations, social media posts, and all other ways we interact with each other. I feel blessed to be the pastor of this diverse community, wherever we are united in our care for one another, our protection of the vulnerable, and our love of God.

Let us pray: Silence in us any voice but yours, O God, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you, O Lord, are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the years there have been many fictional TV dramas about the American presidency. One of them featured the following plotline. A great Asian pianist, a North Korean, comes to visit the White House, and while he is there, he secretly conveys to the President that he wishes to defect. This presents a quandary, both legal and moral, for it is illegal for the President to deny such a direct request. At the same time, the pianist is only in America in the first place because of a diplomatic exchange—part of developing nuclear talks with the North Koreans. Obviously, allowing the young pianist to defect would derail any political progress that might be made to help the masses who are suffering. In the end, the President explains these complexities to the young man and leaves him with the choice, telling him that freedom means making choices; in other words, freedom comes with responsibilities. (*The West Wing*, Season 5)

Freedom is an appropriate sermon topic because it isn’t just an American idea, it’s a Christian one. Just about every theologian at some point writes about freedom because it is a fundamental article of faith. Anytime someone mentions God’s providence or guiding hand in the world relative to the human

will, they're talking about freedom. Whenever people ask, "Is God in charge, or are we?" "Does prayer work?" "Does my way of living determine what will happen when I die?" All of these are questions about freedom.

Martin Luther, the Reformation theologian, made one of the more significant contributions to the idea of freedom in a little pamphlet called "Christian Liberty." Interestingly, he wrote it at one of the most divisive times in his own political life; it was around 1520, when he was fiercely debating his 95 Theses in hopes of reforming the Catholic Church from within. Luther described Christian freedom this way: A Christian is a "perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and also a "perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (Luther, *Christian Liberty*, Fortress Press, 7.) Now, what the heck does that mean; how can both of those be true?

The first part says a Christian is "perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." That means that when it comes to the big questions in life: salvation, providence, sin... Luther said that when it comes to these things, we are free. We need not worry about them because through Jesus Christ, God has taken on these concerns for us. Now, salvation, sin...these may seem esoteric, but a teacher of mine once explained this idea to me by a very practical example (Bill Placher, "Christian Freedom," May 2006)

Good teachers want to reach all of their students, but with some it's really hard to get through to them. Yet surprisingly, years later, a student you thought you failed to help will sometimes come back and mention something you said that you can't even remember, that changed their life. This is amazing, but also very frightening, because what about the number of times maybe you didn't say the right thing, and you lost somebody? He went on to say that whether you're a teacher, or a surgeon, or a criminal lawyer, or a parent, there are things like this in all of our lives—things we cannot control. And life would be unbearable if we thought the ultimate success or failure of things is really up to us. But it's not. God is the one in control. We can get up in the morning, do our jobs, fly on an airplane, or give kids the keys to the car because of our faith. We can trust God and let go and live our lives. That's freedom: knowing that whatever happens, God is watching over us.

There's a second part to Luther's philosophy: A Christian is "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Luther wrote that because God gives us this amazing gift of freedom, we should be "guided in all [our] works" by "this one thing alone, that [we] may serve others in all that [we do], considering nothing except the need and advantage of [our] neighbor" (Luther, *ibid.*, 28). In other words, if we've taken seriously the gift of freedom that we have from God, there is one response: in the details of this life that you can control: always, always, always, serve the needs of others—this is how we show our thanks to God, the one who gave us the freedom in the first place.

That's the theological explanation of freedom. Here's how it works out in a story.

In the story we heard today, Jacob is the younger brother, the trickster and usurper. Through deceit, he steals the family blessing and birthright from his older brother Esau; it's a serious offense, so great Jacob leaves home and flees for his life; he ends up in the land of Haran, where he lives for 14 years, estranged from his brother.

Last week in her lectures, A-J Levine told us that this is a literary trope; whenever you see two brothers in a Bible story, you're supposed to know what's happening, there's going to be a struggle. The trope of the two brothers struggling for dominance comes up again and again in the Bible. Just before Jacob and Esau there's the story of Isaac and Ishmael; Joseph and his brothers immediately follow. It all begins with Cain and Abel—a story so good John Steinbeck picks up and tells it about two American brothers living East of Eden. This literary theme is not confined to the Old Testament in the Bible, in one of the most well-known stories in the Gospels, the prodigal son and his brother play it out yet again. It's a universal theme: the struggle between brothers. And the introduction to the Jacob and Esau story tells us that this story is never just about brothers. For before Jacob and Esau are ever born, their pregnant mother is told this about her sons:

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” (Genesis 25:23)

Brothers struggle. Nations struggle. Political parties struggle. This story isn't just about you if you have a brother; it's about all of us, for we live in a world that always has divisions. If you think the conversation at your Thanksgiving dinner this week is going to be stilted and difficult, you're in good company. Remember that Jacob couldn't come to Thanksgiving dinner for 14 years, because his brother was going to kill him.

So this is a common story, there are many versions of it, but if you ask people about stories of struggling brothers in the Bible, most will mention the story of Jacob and Esau first. That may be due to the great storytelling, or even just the length of it—it takes up about 10 chapters—but my hunch is that maybe, just maybe the love for this story has more to do with how it ends. After 14 years away, Jacob, with the fortune he has amassed, leaves Haran and rides out on his own to make his way in the world. Soon he hears that his brother Esau is coming in the wilderness with 400 men, coming, Jacob is sure, to kill him. Jacob is so sure of his demise that he takes several steps: he splits his herds and his flocks in two so that if one is wiped out, at least the other will remain. He kisses his family and leaves them behind as he rides out to meet his brother. Praying for mercy, the Scripture says, Jacob “...himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.” And as the story goes:

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." (Gen. 33:3-4)

The Jacob and Esau story touches us because the brothers are reconciled—they learn how to live together again. How does that happen? It happens because though they've been divided for years, though Jacob is so scared of confronting his brother that he splits his fortune and says goodbye to his family before he goes to meet his own brother...nevertheless there is still one brother, Esau, who God inspires to reach out to his sibling and forgive past offenses—to say, I want to know you again. I want us to have a future together. Esau understands freedom. Despite all his difficulties in life, God has taken care of him. He is free to do what he wants with his brother, and he chooses to take responsibility for fixing their relationship.

This is a story about nations and groups of people who are at odds with one another. It is a story for Americans today many of whom are finding themselves deeply divided from one another, as they have been for a long time. It is a story for our congregation and for the neighborhoods that surround us, whether the topic is the election, or the Ray Tensing trial or health care reform: Reconciliation starts with somebody—somebody who wants to listen and learn, to say, I want to know you again. We must do this work, my friends.

If we cannot do that in our church, how can we expect it of our country? It is the responsibility of churches such as ours to learn to talk about our differences and to do so without attacking one another. To model in our church, for the community, the idea that difference can exist without personal attacks or appeals to fear and hate and discrimination. Our country can do better. We as a church must model that behavior with our love and respect for one another. And while we are doing the work of taking the log out of our own eye, we must then be watchful and vigilant for signs of injustice and prejudice and discrimination and we must forbid that behavior and prophetically resist it wherever it may be found. Christian freedom gives us the peace of knowing that God is watching in the places in our lives that are beyond control. But it also carries with it the responsibility to love our neighbors and to do so selflessly, being especially ready to stand up for those who may not be able to stand up for themselves.

In the midst of our own situations and our own hurried lives, these tasks can seem too great, the idea that we can reconcile as a people may seem naïve. That feeling is not without a foundation, for some of the Bible's stories about brothers do not get resolved. But when that happens it is tragic—and it is avoidable; I believe that for a very non-political reason: my experience with families when they lose a loved one. Every minister I know from time to time visits with grieving people who have lost someone from whom they are estranged. Maybe it's a brother, but maybe one who remembers a parent or a child or a friend who died while their relationship was broken. No one knows the tragedy of division better than one who allows the opportunity for forgiveness to

pass them by until it is too late. I have to imagine that those who went before us and have died, look down on us from heaven and simply cannot believe that we spend so much effort divided one from another because of our pride and our arrogance and our refusal to forgive.

In this Thanksgiving week, friends, my humble word to you is this. For Christians, receiving the gifts of freedom means taking the responsibility to love one another as Christ first loved us. Reconciliation begins with people who, out of their own thankfulness for freedom, reach out to others in love. May that work begin here in the church we share.

Amen.