

Be ye therefore imitators [KJV: followers] of God, as beloved [KJV: dear] children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God... Ephesians 5:1-2b

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Bitter, hate-filled enemies. At each other's of enemies. Competing from before the day they'd been born. From the very beginning they had been rivals. Bitter, life and death kinds of rivals. Rivals for affection and blessing. Rivals for control and power. Rivals that, when the very last act of deception was finished, parted as enemies. The younger fleeing from the elder who sought only revenge and death. Avenging the loss of his birthright. Avenging the loss of his father's blessing. One fleeing from the other to save his life. But it is now many years later. More than fourteen, in fact. And much has changed. The younger who fled with only the clothes on his back has been blessed beyond imagining. Flocks and herds; wives and children. Goats and sheep and camels and cattle and donkeys.

But he knows that all of this is not enough. He knows that there is one thing more for him to do. He knows that he must return home. He must return to the land of his father Isaac. The land promised by God to his grandfather Abraham. The land of hope and promise and blessing. So he and his wives and their children and his servants and his flocks and his herds begin that journey. But even as he begins this journey, he can not know what his brother will do. When they parted, they parted as enemies: bitter and hate-filled. So he sends his servants ahead to seek out his brother. To tell him of his return. To seek his favour. But when the servants return, they bring bad news. They have found the long-lost brother. They have told him of his younger brother's return. And they are afraid, because in response to this news, the brother rises to meet him. With four hundred men at his disposal. Jacob knows in his heart what this means. That his brother's anger has not abated. That the bitterness and resentment have not lessened. That his brother will finally, after so many years, have his revenge.

So Jacob does the one thing that he can do. He divides his company into two camps. Hoping that if one is attacked the other will escape undetected and unharmed. Hoping that some might be saved. And he prays. He prays that he might be delivered from his brother's wrath. He prays that the God who had promised to bless him will bless him just this one more time. And to help make his prayer come true, he sends an offering to his brother. Companies of goats and sheep and camels and bulls and cows and donkeys. Rich abundant gifts. Sent along ahead under the care of his servants. As a peace offering to a brother who, he believes, has no peace in his heart. Only bitterness and hatred.

And when daylight comes, so comes sight of his brother. With four hundred men at his side. So Jacob prepares for the worst. He sets his children and their mothers in the back and the servants in front, and he walks on before them all. And, as he approaches his brother, he stops and bows his face to the ground seven times. Showing to his long-estranged brother that he comes in peace.

But before he can speak, before he can offer whatever words of apology come to

his heart, his brother runs to him. He runs to him and embraces him and kisses him. And together those who had been so long divided; so long at war with each other, weep. Together. They weep for all that has been lost. They weep for the time that they might have spent together. For the words that they might have shared. For the company and companionship they had both thrown away. For the opportunities that could never return. And when the older asks the younger what all of those flocks and herds were all about, the younger tells the older that they are a present. A gift. A gift that the older immediately declines because, in his own words, he already has enough. He wants no more. He needs no peace offering. He needs no gift. Which the younger acknowledges but still begs him to accept because, in the words of the younger, to see the face of his brother is to see the face of God.

It's a story that moves me to tears every time I read it. It is a story of immense power. And like so many great stories, it speaks from the deep well of division and resentment and anger. Where so many of our human stories spring. And it is a story that plays out every day in our lives. A story that plays out in every place and time. It is the story of brother against brother; of sister against sister. Right now, this very moment, we see this story playing out in all of its brutality and violence on the streets and in the homes of the people of Ukraine. Violence and brutality of neighbour against neighbour; of brother against brother.

And the sad reality of humanity's collective story is that so many of our stories never rise above the confines of that deep well of division and resentment and anger. Where bitterness rules the day; and the heart. That well where we so often choose to wallow. Hugging our wrath to keep it warm.

This week's Gospel picks up a theme that we have seen unfold on the first two Sundays in Lent. It's a theme that we saw boldly two weeks ago when we read again of that great battle between Christ and Satan; that great battle to know the Will of the Father and to follow it; that battle not to choose the lesser good of individual will; the lesser good of personal goals and ambitions.

And we saw it again last week when we heard the story of that Canaanite woman, whose daughter, she tells us, is vexed with a devil; a story again of how Jesus came to know better the Will of the Father, who had sent him to save not just the lost sheep of the house of Israel but all lost sheep, in every time and place.

So we should not be surprised to see evil spirits again at the centre of this week's Gospel. But this time it is not Christ who has to wrestle with evil. This time we hear of the battle that comes to each one of us. Whether we realise it or not. Whether or not we choose to acknowledge it.

And we are reminded that if we truly want to win that spiritual battle for our souls that has been at the centre of the Gospel for each of these three Sundays, we have to fill our souls with something better. That if we are to be freed from all the many different evil spirits that rule our very broken world, and even our very broken hearts, we have to do more than just sweep out the spirit of division and resentment and bitterness that so often and so easily settle there. We have to do more. We have to will what the Father wills. We have to rise above individual goals and personal ambitions. We have to choose love. If we are to be free. We have to imitate God's love until our souls are filled with love. Every day.