When Jacob moved back home, he was right to send a lot of gifts ahead of him to Esau. Jacob had a lot to make up for. He had tricked Esau and their father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing and the birthright meant for his brother. He moved back home with more than a little fear, separating his family into groups behind him, so they could not be killed all at once; sending his flocks of animals ahead of them. It turned out the Esau didn’t really want his gifts. He accepted them only when Jacob insisted. But he did eventually accept them. And they did reconcile, although in the Bible story it isn’t necessarily as warm and fuzzy as in the Ted and Company version. But at the end of the Bible story, they both move forward: Esau to Seir and Jacob to Succoth and then Shechem. It’s interesting that they don’t end up in the same place. But they do both move forward.

What does it take to move the story forward? Not only our story but God’s story? That is my question. Jacob could have let fear keep him from returning home. Or he could have met Esau with violence instead of reaching out to him with gifts and humility. Esau could have rejected Jacob’s gifts. He could have killed Jacob, as he had sworn to do when he was angry over what he perceived as his inferior blessing given by their father. How many of us are generous to not only admit we were wrong but reach out in generosity to those we have wronged? And how tempting is it when we have been hurt to leave the other person hanging with their apology. You’re sorry? Really?? Sorry. That’s not good enough for me.

Sometimes when I got in a conflict or an argument, my father used to ask me, “Do you want to be right? Or is there something else that you want? What is your ultimate goal here?” Sometimes we are
so hung up on winning. And it turns out that we’ve lost sight of what winning really is. It reminds me of the story of King Solomon when two women are arguing over a baby. King Solomon proposes the solution of cutting the baby in two. One woman is satisfied with this solution. The other woman is horrified and would give the baby up rather than have that happen. We need to ask ourselves in each case, “What is the baby?” We have to value the baby more than our own egos. “What is it that we should not sacrifice in order to win?” In each situation we must ask not only what we want but, “What does God want?” What would winning in this situation look like to God? And then we need to subvert our own will to work for that.

In our second story, when Joseph meets his brothers he holds all the cards. He has all the power. He is Pharaoh’s right hand man. Oh boy, he could really make them pay for throwing him in a pit and leaving him for dead. Now is his opportunity to get them back. In fact, he doesn’t even have to actively hurt them. He could just refuse to feed them – a passive way to make them suffer. But he doesn’t. Even though he is angry and conflicted and sorrowful, Joseph can still see what is most important. He not only feeds his brothers but reconciles with them. And in the end he has come to see that God has used their evil actions to bless him and use him for God’s purposes. God has blessed Egypt and the surrounding nations with food in a time of famine through Joseph. He is in a position to help them survive. Joseph says to his brothers, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” (Gen 30:19-21) And so the story moves forward.

This makes me think of a favorite quote from J. R. R. Tolkien’s book *The Lord of the Rings*. The hero, Frodo, is appalled and frightened because a wretched murderous creature called Gollum is following him, hoping to recover the magic ring that he once held and Frodo now carries. Frodo says
that it’s a pity that his uncle, Bilbo, did not kill Gollum when he had the chance because Gollum has done so much evil that he deserves death. Gandalf the wizard says, “Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the wise cannot see all ends. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least.” And in the end Frodo needs Gollum to help him destroy the ring, and in doing so, save the world. Many times we perceive things to be unfair or unjust. Perhaps they are. But perhaps there is also a larger perspective that we can’t see.

In our third and final story, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi from a Roman prison. He writes that God has even used him in prison because he has been able to spread the gospel to the whole imperial guard, and his imprisonment has emboldened some to “speak the word without fear.” Further, he says he knows that some proclaim Christ from envy, rivalry and ambition, and seek to increase his suffering. But Paul says that their motives don’t matter to him. What matters is that Christ is being proclaimed.

It’s clear from Paul’s letters that he has a healthy ego. He is not shy, in some of the other letters, about advancing his credentials, his own virtue, or his authority. But in this case, Paul surrenders his ego entirely to the advancement of the Gospel. It doesn’t matter why someone preaches the Gospel. What matters is that it’s being preached! Prison seems to bring Paul a kind of clarity. Thomas Long preached on this text at Annual Conference and he said that in prison Paul can distinguish “between what matters and what seems to matter. His ministry doesn’t matter compared to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Further it doesn’t matter in the church who wins or loses as long as the Gospel is proclaimed. We can all win! We can all win even when we lose. Because according to Long, “In the life of the church, it’s not a zero-sum game.”
Sometimes extreme circumstances force us to see what really matters. In the face of death, we appreciate our friends and loved ones even more. When our house is on fire, we know what is most important to save. What if we could have this perspective about what really matters all the time? What if we could let go of what doesn’t matter, especially our own egos? One of my alternative sermon titles was, “Getting Over Ourselves and Getting On With It.”

I must admit that getting over myself takes repeated effort for me. The things that are gifts for ministry, sensitivity and being prone to introspection and over-analyzing, are also things that can lead to defensiveness. When I feel offended or hurt, I can actually feel the tension building up in my body as I start to build a self-protective wall mentally and spiritually. And I feel irritated when I hear God calling me to let go of my defensiveness and submit my ego to God once again. I sometimes have a little useless argument with God, “Really??? Again??? Really???” And then I sigh a deep sigh… and let go once again. Because it’s really not about me.

We can get caught up in a cycle of defensiveness in relationship. Each side staunchly defending its rights, extolling its righteousness, lamenting its woundedness. I’ve seen couples in the throes of divorce spiraling down in a series of ugly actions against one another, each one justifying their own actions by their own feelings of victimization. I look at the horrible violence in Israel and Palestine and think of the escalation of violence there in the last 65 years – each side justifying its actions because of the violence, injustice, and hatred it has experienced from the other side. Where does it end? Where does it end? It’s hard to understand Israel’s objective at this point. Like the woman who is willing to cut the baby in half, I think perhaps they’ve lost sight of their objective. It is entirely possible that they will kill or drive out every Palestinian from Israel. And what will they have gained? A country that is surrounded by people that hate them and wish them dead because of the violence and injustice they have perpetrated. But I must say, I don’t let the Palestinians totally off the hook either. Their leaders have
thwarted the peace process for decades with violent action. And before we cast too many stones, we all have blood on our hands. We helped to create the state of Israel after World War II and armed it because we did not want to accept the flood of European Jewish refugees in our own country. If we look back even further, we helped to create the conditions for the Nazis rise to power in Germany but our punitive actions toward Germany after World War I. Where does it end?

For us it ends in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace. In the good news of peace and justice through non-violent action and serving one’s neighbor. The way of Jesus is the way of vulnerability, rather than defensiveness. Factions in the denomination and our own conflicts with others can drain precious energy we could put toward being what Jesus called us to be – salt for the earth, a light for the world.

What are we doing here? Why are we a part of the church? It’s not just about us, it’s about us as a congregation. It’s about us as the Body of Christ, building one another up and equipping ourselves to share that Good News, the Good News that is the hope of the world. It’s an end to the endless cycle of self-protection and retaliation through violence. It’s welcoming the refugee and serving the poor. It’s loving one another – our neighbors and our enemies. What is the Gospel to you? What really matters? Let’s find a way to live and die doing that and not waste our time here.

What does it take to move our own story forward and not live in the past (past glory or past sadness)? We are an incredibly gifted congregation and this is an exciting time for ministry. What does it take to move our congregation’s story forward? We have such a rich legacy to build upon. What does it take for us to move our part of God’s story forward for the good of the world? I am excited to explore these questions together with you, as we find our way forward. May it all be for God’s glory and our neighbor’s good.