

“Jacob the Trickster”

Genesis 27: 1-4; 15-23, 28: 10-17

We are picking back up with our journey through Genesis today and in our text, we meet Jacob, also known as “The Trickster”. This guy’s very name should be a clue for us because in Hebrew, his name means “he takes by the heel” or “He supplants”. Now granted, more than likely, he gets this name because literally at birth, he was gripping his brother’s Esau’s heel. Esau first but shortly after comes Jacob holding onto Esau’s heel.

But let’s just say over time, Jacob more than lives up to his name as one who supplants the other. After all, we don’t have to look very far in Jacob’s story to experience his true tricky character.

One of our first introductions to Jacob is his successful bribing of Esau, his brother. Esau comes in hungry from working in the field. Jacob sees an opportunity to get ahead. He bribes his brother into turning over his birthright with a bit of stew. Now, not all the blame can be put at Jacob’s feet. Esau does carry some blame here as well. If the birthright was so important to Esau, if it meant so much to him, then he should have known better and taken better care of it. But come on, let’s face it...in seeing Esau tired and hungry, Jacob sees an opportunity to get

ahead. He takes advantage of the situation. So by trick and deceit, he gets what he wants, regardless of what is right and what is wrong.

However, this isn't the worst of Jacob's misdeeds. He does quite a bit more distrustful, deceitful, and yes selfish things to make sure he keeps getting ahead. I don't know which is worse: the time he lied to his father who was blind and on his deathbed or the time when he was running away from his brother, in which he decided to put the women and children first in the caravan. He did this so that there would be some distance between him and the danger so that if trouble did happen, Jacob could make a clean getaway. Now Jacob does put his favorites towards the back of the caravan. He puts Leah and her children first while he puts Rebekah and Joseph in the back but still...he puts women and children first so that if there is trouble he can run away while abandoning his family, letting them suffer the consequences of his actions. Like I said, what a guy!

In fact, the more and more we learn about Jacob, we aren't really sure what exactly his purpose is. As people of faith, we aren't sure if we are told these stories about Jacob to show us what not to do. Is Jacob supposed to be some anti-good example of faith that we are suppose to learn to do the exact opposite of what he does? Or is the harder task that we are supposed to struggle with is-are we supposed to like this guy?

We aren't really sure what to do about Jacob. We aren't really sure what to think about Jacob. We just don't know. There is no definite- we hate him or we like him clear dividing line. Jacob just is...and we aren't sure what to do about him.

Now granted to give Jacob a little bit of grace, he comes by his trickery naturally. After all, his family did put the fun in dysfunctional. I mean really...his grandfather Abraham did take his dad Isaac out when Isaac was a boy to sacrifice him...all because God told him to do so. That experience had to have done something mentally and emotionally to Isaac who later grows up to be Jacob's father. Like I said, first dysfunctional family right here in the very first book of the Bible.

So what do we do with Jacob? What lessons can he teach us about the foundations of our faith?

Well, I think first and foremost, the greatest lesson Jacob can teach us is to not judge a person on part of his or her story. It is up to us to learn the complete story before we even start assuming we know this person. For example....did you know it wasn't Jacob's idea to trick his father who was blind and on his death bed? It was his mother's idea. Take a look at Chapter 27 verse 5: Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷ 'Bring

me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.’⁸ Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you.⁹ Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes;¹⁰ and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.”¹¹ But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, “Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin.¹² Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.”¹³ His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me.”¹⁴ So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved.¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob;¹⁶ and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck.¹⁷ Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

Jacob was clearly trying not to deceive his dad. Jacob is worried that Isaac would notice the difference and think Jacob was mocking him. When we learn more about this story, there does seem to be some humanity lurking underneath all that trickery of Jacob’s.

However, once again, when it comes to this situation, don’t blame Rebekah. We have to remember that when Rebekah was pregnant with Esau and Jacob, she received a word from the Lord that told her that the elder would serve the younger. For all we know, Rebekah believed that, in tricking Isaac, she was fulfilling God’s word.

Because the one thing that I have come to learn about people is that we all have our reasons for doing what we do. These reasons may seem illogical to others but they make perfect sense to us. We all have our reasons for doing what we do. Whether good or bad, there is always a reason.

I think it is safe to say that the more we learn about Jacob and his journey of faith, the more we can learn about ourselves. You see, it is easy to say we are not anything like that guy. We aren't tricksters. We aren't deceiving old blind guys on their death bed. We are trying to be the person God created us to be. It is easy for us to say, Well, at least we aren't that bad.

But is that what we want as our measuring stick? "We aren't that bad?" I think one of the real reasons we struggle with Jacob and his story is that more often than not he makes us come to terms with our humanity. He makes us come to terms with the reasons for why we do the things we do. I think we struggle with Jacob and his story because he is real for us. He is not like the other characters in Genesis that we have met so far. You know those others that seem almost too good to be true.

Jacob is messy. Jacob is broken. Jacob is you. Jacob is me. I think we struggle with Jacob and his story because in the end, life doesn't end happily ever after for him. His own sons lie to him about his other son, Joseph. They tell Jacob

that Joseph is dead when instead, they sold Joseph into slavery. Don't worry, we'll get to this one in a few weeks.

Jacob's journey of faith makes us realize that life is not perfect. For Jacob, It is messy. It is broken. It is imperfect. It has its ups and downs. Now once again...a lot of these ups and downs have to do with his crazy dysfunctional family but still...isn't there a small part of us that expects, that believes that if we as the people of God just try to be faithful to God's promises then everything will fall into place. Jacob's story shows us that that doesn't always happen.

So I think the other lesson we can take from Jacob and his journey of faith is that as we learn more about it, we realize that God is not the God of the ideal. God is the God of the real. Let me say that again: God is not the God of the ideal. God is the God of the real.

God is the God of messy, broken, tricky, grumpy, and yes...very real people. During all of Jacob's good and bad moments, during all the moments where he "gets it" and moments where he is clueless, God is there.

And the same holds true for us. During all the many times in which we find ourselves in that moment where our reasons for doing things don't any sense to anyone else but us, God is there. Through it all, in our messy, real, broken life, in all the moments of ups and downs that happen because of other crazy tricky people or because we played tricks of our own, during all of it...God's promise remains.

The promise that says: "I am God. I am the God of your ancestors. I am the God of your descendants." In the midst of our messy, our very real, sometimes our very broken lives, God's promise of hope, God's promise of love, God's promise of grace remain. They continue. They help us tell the rest of the story.

I have this magnet that was given to me by my sister. It stays on my refrigerator and I see it every morning as I am getting breakfast stuff together. It says "For all anyone knows, we are a nice normal family. Let's keep them guessing".

You see, so much of our effort and time is used up to create this ideal façade that we all try to maintain, this ideal façade that hides away the messiness and the brokenness of life. I'm here to tell you that this way of being is tiring. It wears us out. It wears us so much that we don't have time to do what we as people of faith are called to do and to be. We simply don't have the energy to be the people of God. Which is really sad and heart-breaking because it really is so simple. We make it complicated but it really is so simple. All we have to be is the person God created us to be, not ideal but real. God created us to include the good, the bad, the ugly and the breath-takingly beautiful. All we really have to do as the people of God is not be perfect but instead create opportunities for all of God's children to experience the grace and love of God.

And we can't do this until we know the rest of that person's story...

I shared in this month's Contact that a while ago, woman shared with me a vision. She shared that God had sent her a message for us as people of faith, as a community of faith. This message was that our spiritual connection to God was clogged. It was blocked and we were sick, withering on the vine.

She said that God told her that we needed to literally go out onto the streets and lay hands on people, to go out and bring healing to people. I listened to this woman share this vision but I have to tell you, I was really uncomfortable. God wants me to go and put my hands on people. Doesn't God know I could get arrested for that?

However, the more I thought of this woman's words, I came to realize a few truths. Our elders do laying on of hands all the time. We saw it last week as we ordained our elders for service. I also know that the act of laying on of hands has been done by our elders while someone was on his deathbed. I also know that our elders have laid hands on someone who was sick.

You see, I had forgotten that the act of laying on of hands is not about being comfortable. It is about the connection to God. The love and grace of God flows from our hands into the other person with just one simple act.

That's also the power of Jacob's story as well. We learn that in spite of all his trickery and deceit, he has this experience with the presence of God and it opens his eyes. His spiritual connection to God before this moment was blocked

and clogged but after his dream, his dream where he sees angels ascending and descending...it is open. He is ready to become the person God calls him to be.

Now, I need to be honest... did this one experience with the presence of God change Jacob completely? No...He was still a trickster in some sense. Just read how he tricks his father in law. This trickery happens not long after this experience with the presence of God.

But what I think is significant about this moment for Jacob and for us as well is that it serves as a reminder that God continues to work in our world, that God continues to shape us into the person that God created us to be. It serves as a reminder that God is not the God of the ideal but rather, God is the God of the real. God uses what God has got, us messy, broken, very real people to bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's creation. And God can't do that until we become open to the presence of God and get to know the rest of each other's story. So maybe we aren't going out and literally laying hands on others but we can still go out and talk to others, find out the rest of their story. We can go out and show the world that God is not the God of the ideal. Instead God is the God of the real.

Because remember that for all people know, we are a nice normal community of faith. May we always keep them guessing. Amen.