

Sermon for July 18, 2021—“The Nature of Grace”

Sixteenth Sunday in OT, Year B—Texts: Genesis 32:3–33:11, Luke 10:38-42

As we read scripture during worship, week in and week out, considering its meaning and relevance for our lives, we often find that there are many layers of meaning. They often take us deeper, well beyond what’s immediately obvious, often challenging the ways we’ve previously heard and understood it. With that in mind, I submit to you today’s story of Jacob at the river Jabbock, also known as Jacob at Peniel.

We might just assume that it’s a simple story about Jacob and what happens to him on that strange night when he wrestled with a being—possibly an angel—who seemed like God himself. Nothing more. Nothing less.

That may be fine, if we take that part of the story on its own. But we cannot seriously hear what this story is saying or—more importantly—what the author of this sophisticated tale is trying to tell us, if we don’t place that struggle in its context and pay attention to everything he says about what happened.

Jacob’s famous struggle at the place he ended up calling Peniel, because of the wound he received there was meant to be heard in the context of what comes both before it and afterward. Furthermore, it may not even be the most important part of the story, even though it’s received all of the attention. Okay—so what’s happening here?

Well, after twenty, long-suffering years trying to get a wife for himself from his uncle Laban, Jacob’s on his way back to the land of his ancestors, the land his father Isaac had given him, the land God had promised. More importantly, he’s on his way back to everything he’d stolen from his older brother Esau.

Now, the last time Jacob had seen Esau, Esau wanted to kill him. Literally. I mean Esau wanted Jacob the trickster dead. He wanted to kill him for stealing his birthright and their father’s blessing. He wanted to kill him for the sleazy way he’d gone about it. Esau knew a liar and a cheat when he saw one and wasn’t afraid to say exactly how he felt about it. Jacob had shamed his family and what’s more, he’d gotten away with it. Jacob even profited from being a fugitive, managing to make a bundle by putting one over on his uncle.

So, leaving home on the run with nothing but the shirt on his back, he now returns as a prosperous tribal chief with wives and children, servants and livestock, as big as a small army. It was an impressive sight and Jacob was clearly counting on that—that is, counting on impressing his dim-witted brother Esau. Problem is, he sees Esau coming to meet him with 400 armed men! And that’s when he has his famous experience with the strange night visitor.

Now, much ink has flowed and many a sermon has been preached about that dark, troubling encounter. Was it a man with whom Jacob struggled? Was it an angel? Was it God himself? What kind of blessing did Jacob want? What kind of blessing did he receive? Did he receive it? And if he did—how did it change him? Did it—in fact—change him? We’re left to wonder about much of the encounter, especially if we don’t consider it in its context.

So, the very next day, Jacob finally gets to meet Esau and things somehow seem clearer in the light of day. He wakes up and joins his family and it's then that he sees Esau coming to him.

This time, instead of playing the coward, instead of hiding behind his wives and children, Jacob tells them all to stand back, while he goes on himself to meet Esau, alone and defenseless. It's probably the gutsiest thing Jacob ever did—and probably the only time he tried to do anything, not being entirely sure whether there was something in it for him. He just went alone to face the brother he'd cheated and betrayed, not knowing what would happen next.

It's here that the storyteller turns the lens away from Jacob and focuses it squarely on his estranged brother Esau. What will the rugged, impulsive Esau do, now that Jacob is giving him the chance, especially after having had 20 years to think about it?

One thing's certain: both of them had given very serious thought to what Esau might do. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and wept—as the story says. I'm guessing that was probably the **last** thing Jacob was expecting.

I'm guessing that never in his wildest dreams would Jacob ever have even dared to hope that Esau, the brother he'd treated so despicably, would forgive him. And not only forgive him, but do it with such heartfelt tenderness. But that's just what the story says Esau did.

Esau—Big Red—the hairy, strong, macho-man, with more appetite than brains, the one who couldn't see things coming until after he'd been hit over the head, gives his brother, ol' Jake the Snake, precisely **more** than he deserves once again. Only this time, it isn't because Esau's too stupid **not** to, but because he simply **wants** to.

My money says that **this** is high-point of the story and that Jacob's famous struggle the night before is only the anti-climax. If Jacob, or any one of us, wondered whether the one that Jacob had encountered at Peniel was God, here, Jacob has no doubts.

When Esau asks Jacob why he's sent half of his property as a gift to him, Jacob replies, “...**for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.**” In other words, whatever blessing Jacob may've asked for and received at Peniel, he saw it in the tear-drenched face of his long-lost brother Esau. What Jacob received here was a blessing that was his only because it was freely given. An undeserved blessing freely given.

We have a name for that sort of thing. Anyone know what it is? It's called GRACE. Therefore, the love of God and the love of a long-estranged brother, or any family member or friend, belong **together**. We can no more separate them than we can stand apart from the person every one of us is meant to be.

This story, the story of Jacob and Esau at Jabbock is, in the end, story of incredible grace. Grace that we can never anticipate and with which we all must struggle, probably to the end of our days—or at least until we learn that we'll never find what we really need until we find it in the faces ...of all those from whom we've been estranged, especially as those faces reflect the face of God. Such is the nature of grace.

Different than justice, when we get what we deserve, different than mercy, when we don't get what we deserve, grace happens when we get what we **don't** deserve. Grace is God's unmerited favor, his goodness toward those who have no claim on it, nor any reason to expect it. It is—simply stated—a gift. Do we begin to see the picture?

Many of us approach God, as Jacob initially approached Esau. We come to worship, put money in the collection plate, occasionally read the bible, pray from time to time. We try to do it right, to do the right thing. We try to live the right way, and so forth. And that's fine. Then, however, God asks us, "What's all this?"

We say, "Well, Lord, we're here for some grace." God smiles and lovingly responds, "That's great, but I don't need any of this. All things are mine in the first already. I don't **need** anything from you. I don't **need** you—you need **me** and so because I love you, I'm offering my grace **freely**. It's based on **my** love, not **your** work." Does anyone find this as overwhelming as I do? How could God love us so doggone much?

When we truly recognize the magnitude of this incredible gift, what do we do? Do we take back our gifts? Do we say, "Hey—if this salvation is by grace, then why do or give anything?" Of course not! Perish the thought!

No, we give as a response to what we've been given! Knowing that our giving, no matter what we give, no matter how much we give, we can never outgive God. John's first letter reminds us that "we love because He first loved us." So rather than working furiously and wondering what we can possibly bring in the hopes of gaining favor with God, we ask Him to please accept our gift as a thankful response to His grace.

By the way, there's a name for all this, anyone know what that is? If you said stewardship—you're right! So, the question for us is—and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: Why are we serving God today or—for that matter—on any given day? Not how, why?

Are we like Jacob as he began with Esau, trying to gain God's favor? Are we like Martha, when Jesus came to visit her and her sister Mary, so busy **doing**, so busy serving God, so concerned that the right things be done the right way in order to win God's favor, that we're missing God himself, the necessary thing, as Jesus said, "...the better part"?

Or are we like Jacob, after his encounter with Esau; so awed and amazed, so overwhelmed that God has accepted us and offered us **His** amazing grace, that we offer Him the gift of **our** lives—as He offered us the gift of His Son? Are we willing to let our lives be changed, maybe even transformed, by this gift of grace?

The great Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is quoted as saying that, "It is the nature of grace always, to fill spaces which have been empty." That's what grace does. It fills empty spaces. In the lives of individuals and in relationships between individuals. It's the key to reconciliation and the key to understanding the story of the reunion of Jacob and Esau at the river Jabbock. It's there that Jacob finally gets it—that all God wants is us, and our worship. That's it.

That's the nature of grace!

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.