

**Sermon for July 30, 2023—“A Picture of Grace”**  
Seventeenth Sunday in OT, Year A—Texts: Genesis 32:3—33:11

As we read scripture, week in and week out, and consider 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 them.

With that in mind, I submit to you today’s reading—the story of Jacob at the river Jabbok. We might just assume that it’s a story about Jacob, and what happens to him on that strange night when he wrestled with a man whose identity has been the subject of several millennia of debate. Nothing more. Nothing less.

That may be fine, if we take that part of the story on its own. That is, out of the context of the larger passage. 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 had given him, the land that God had promised. More importantly, he’s on his way back to everything he’d stolen from his big brother Esau. The last time Jacob had seen Esau, Esau wanted to straight up kill him. Why?

Well, basically, for stealing his birthright, and father Isaac’s blessing. It was the sleazy way he’d gone about it. Jacob had shamed his family, and had gotten away with it. Jacob even profited from it, managing to make a fortune putting one over on his uncle. Leaving home on the run, with nothing but the shirt on his back. He returns as a prosperous tribal chief with wives and children, livestock and servants, enough for a small army. It was an impressive sight, and Jacob was clearly counting on that to impress his dim-witted brother Esau. One problem, he sees Esau coming to meet him with four hundred men. Four hundred **armed** men! And that’s when he has his now-famous experience with the strange night visitor.

Now, as I said, the identity of this visitor has been the subject of several millennia of debate. Who was this person? Was he an angel? Was it God? Was it, as some Christian theologians assert, the pre-incarnation Jesus? What kind of blessing did Jacob want? What kind of blessing did he receive? Did he receive it? And if he did—did it change him? If so—how?

This story of this encounter asks more questions than it answers, especially—as mentioned—if read out of context of what happens next. For the very next day Jacob finally meets 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 alone to meet Esau. It’s probably the gutsiest thing Jacob ever did, and was probably the only time he tried to do anything not being entirely sure if there was something in it for him. He went alone to face the brother that he’d cheated and betrayed, not knowing what would happen.

It’s here that the storyteller moves the focus from Jacob to his estranged brother Esau. What will the rugged, impulsive Esau do now that Jacob is right in front of him, 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 oddly enough, Esau ran to meet Jacob.

The text says that he “**embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him**” and that they both wept. I bet no one saw that coming, especially not Jacob! I’m guessing that never in his wildest dreams would Jacob had ever even dared to hope that Esau, the brother he’d treated so despicably, would forgive him, and do so with such heartfelt tenderness. But that’s just what Esau did.

Why in the world would Esau do such a thing? Jacob doesn’t deserve any of it! This is just incredible! This what I love about the Bible, and my money says that **this** is high-point of the story.

Jacob’s struggle the night before is merely the prologue, and if he, or any one of us, had any questions about who Jacob encountered at Peniel, well, here, Jacob has no doubts. What do I mean? Well, when Esau asks Jacob why he has 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 found it in the tear-drenched face of his long-lost brother Esau. It was a blessing that was his only because it had been freely **given**, and that it definitely changed Jacob in a profound way! How about that? An undeserved blessing freely given.

You know—there’s a name for that. Anyone know what it is? Yep, grace. This is what the story is ultimately all about. **GRACE**. It’s something we can never anticipate, and with which we must struggle, all of our lives. Grace is a game-changer.

It’s different than justice, when we get what we deserve. It’s 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 blessing, his goodness, his love—toward those who have no claim on it, or reason to expect it. It is, simply stated, a gift. It is—as I said last week—the better part, the part that will not—cannot—be taken away from us.

Do we begin to see the picture? Does anyone find this as overwhelming as I do? How could God love us so much? Why would God love us so much? Why indeed?

But as important as these questions are they’re not the ones we should concern ourselves with as we try and make sense of things here this morning. What am I talking about? Well it’s just this, and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: I said a moment ago that grace was a game changer. And so the real question here is this: Are we willing to allow God’s grace change us as it changed Jacob?

Johannes von Goethe once wrote that, “**It is the nature of grace always, to fill spaces which have been empty.**” That’s what grace does, and that’s why grace is the key to understanding the story of Jacob and Esau at the river Jabbok. What a picture of grace it paints!

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.