



## *“Very Engaging”*

Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5

Rev. Al Bunis

**July 31, 2011**

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

On my desk...I keep a picture of Michelangelo's famous painting...from the ceiling in the Sistine Chapel...of the creation...in which God is reaching for Adam...with fingers almost touching.

In that painting...which I find very moving...God seems to be straining to reach for Adam...while Adam...seems to only very subtly...to lift his finger in response.

What I find so moving...about this painting...is that it captures...something I believe in my core...something that is central to Christianity...

the belief that God craves a relationship with each and every one of us...that God reaches out to us...no matter who we are.

In Christianity...we call this **grace**.

The past two weeks...we have been looking at the story of Jacob in the Book of Genesis. And as David has talked about extensively...this story of Jacob...is a story of God's **grace**.

Jacob is the first character in the Bible we really get to know in detail. We are with him...literally from birth until death. And it is not a pretty picture.

He is basically a conniving crook...who through deceit and trickery...steals something...that was due to...Esau...his fraternal twin brother. He steals their father's blessing...something greatly valued in ancient times.

And this deceit...is what makes it so remarkable that...God reaches out to Jacob...that God makes such profound promises to Jacob...despite who he is.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "...luckily for Jacob, God doesn't love people because of who they are but because of who he is. It's 'on the house' is one way of saying it...and it's 'by **grace**' is another...just as it was by **grace**...that Jacob of all people...became not only the father of the twelve tribes of Israel...but many times over great grandfather of Jesus...and just as it was by **grace**...that Jesus was born into this world at all."

Yes...Jacob's story is about **grace**.

And in this story...we can take such confidence...that if God hangs in there with Jacob...despite his remarkable flaws...of course God will hang in there with us...despite our own unique flaws...

\* that just like in Michelangelo's painting...God will always...no matter what...strenuously reach for us.

Today...we'll be looking at the next installment of Jacob's story. This story too...is about Grace...but from a slightly different angle. And the question that today's text speaks to is this: what should we do to reach back to God...how might we respond to God's grace?

Again...like in Michelangelo's painting...with God's finger so eagerly extended...the question we'll talk about is...how should each of us...lift our own fingers...in response?

It is a profound question that has been hotly debated by theologians...throughout Christianity.

And in today's iconic story...of Jacob wrestling with a mysterious figure...I think we get a strong perspective on this question.

In today's story...Jacob finds himself in quite a predicament. And so it is helpful to backtrack a bit...and remind ourselves of how Jacob got into this situation.

Two weeks ago...in the "Jacob's Ladder" story...we saw that in response to Jacob's thievery...Esau was so angry...that he promises to kill his brother. And thus...out of self-preservation...Jacob flees.

While on the run...he has a dream...the "Jacob's Ladder" dream.

And in this dream...God reaches out to Jacob...reassuring him...that as Abraham's grandson...that he is blessed...that he will be protected...and that God will build a great people in his bloodline.

Yes...God's grace here...it is surprising...for the simple reason that Jacob is such a scoundrel.

And then...in last week's continuation of the story...we find Jacob...in exile...with his uncle Laban. And the scheming and the trickery continue. Except this time it's more of an even match...between two tricksters...Jacob and his uncle.

But eventually...Jacob wears out his welcome. And so...with the promise of God's continuing protection...he realizes that he needs to leave again...to sneak away...for his own safety.

Again...we see God's grace...we see God reaching for...and protecting...this undeserving scoundrel.

But this time...there is something different in his decision to leave again. At God's prompting...Jacob decides that it is time to end the running...to return home...to confront his great fear.

And that brings us to today's story.

This all must have been quite stressful for Jacob. He has put himself in a very precarious position.

He's hemmed in on all sides. He has worn out his welcome with his Uncle...and he is being told by God...to return home...which means facing the wrath of his brother.

While I suppose he could have made other decisions...gone somewhere else...he seems to have finally decided...that it's time...to face the music...to face up to his past actions.

Just prior to the beginning of our text...we get some insight into the stress he was under. We are told that "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed." And then...because of this...he falls into prayer.

And in that prayer...he does something that has been uncharacteristic so far in his life – he is humble...and earnest.

He prays to God...saying: "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown your servant."

And then...he does what any of us would do...in such a difficult position...he asks God for deliverance "from the hand of my brother..."

With the confidence of this prayer as his tailwind...Jacob plans for the dreaded reunion...by sending word ahead to his brother...that he is sorry. Apology...apparently an important first step.

And then...as our passage begins...the night before he is to see his brother again...Jacob is alone...undoubtedly worried and frightened...with much on his mind.

In an accounting course I took...in a bank training program...the professor had an expression that has stuck with me all these years. In addressing the issue of fraud...the issue of cooking the books...he likened fraud to getting stuck on a "treadmill."

His point was that once someone initiates a fraud...to perpetuate it...the cover up begins...and the cover up...spawns other cover ups...and pretty soon...perpetrators find themselves on this metaphorical "treadmill."

To keep up...they have to run faster and faster...and the faster they need to go...the harder it is to get off...with ever more frightening consequences.

Well...this feels to me...like Jacob's situation. And the good news is...that he has finally decided to own up to his past...to try and get off of the treadmill.

And what happens next...it's one of the most memorable...and mysterious...of passages...in the entire Bible. And it all happens very quickly...in rapid-fire succession.

In a dream-like sequence...Jacob first wrestles all night...with someone who we are simply told is "a man." Then...after neither prevails...this mysterious character strikes Jacob's hip...leaving him injured. But...Jacob refuses to let go...until his adversary gives him a blessing.

This so-called man...he next...renames Jacob "Israel"...with the new name apparently reflecting the fact that Jacob has...as the text says...strived "with God...and with humans...and...prevailed."

Jacob then asks the man his name...whereupon...for no clear reason...Jacob gets his blessing. In joy...Jacob names the place...where all this happens..."Peniel"...because...as he says..."I have seen God face-to-face...and yet my life is preserved."

And finally...Jacob limps away.

Any way you slice it...this was a major turning point in Jacob's life. Shortly thereafter...he has a wonderful and emotional reunion with Esau...at which all is forgiven.

Seemingly overcome with emotion...Jacob says to his brother..."to see your face...is like seeing the face of God"

And while Jacob's life from that point forward...is far from easy...no-one led easy lives in those days...he does seem to have eliminated the game playing...the trickery...apparently no longer feeling the need to resort to such deceit.

And God's promise...does indeed play out...with the great nation of Israel...springing from Jacob's 12 sons. Yes...the rest is history...our history.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this odd and mysterious story...from a culture so far removed from our own...is the different levels...at which...it speaks to us today...how it is relevant today.

And the message seems to shout...in various ways...**stop running and engage**...engage with God...and with our brothers and sisters.

It is a message of trust in God...trust in God's deliverance...faith in God's promises...a message of confidence in God's grace.

It's a message of turning around...changing directions...and that is precisely what the word "repent" means...to turn around.

And it's also a message that shunning...that exiling...whether we do it to ourselves...or to others...or even to God...that it does not work...that it will ultimately leave us in a bind.

No...today's story...it moves us in the opposite direction...towards **re-engaging**....and it does so...from many different angles.

To begin with...Jacob's example seems to be telling us something about dealing with our own demons. While far from a Pollyanna-ish depiction...it tells us that there is something positive about...facing up to past difficulties...to skeletons in the closet.

And the first thing Jacob does...when he decides to confront his past...without any more trickery...is to reach out to God...by getting down on his knees to pray.

Sounding like we do in our own weekly prayers of confession...his is a humble prayer...that finally acknowledges that he is not worthy...of the confidence and support...the gift of grace...that God has given him...up to that point.

And then comes the hard part...the real wrestling begins. And in the process...we seem to be being told something so logical...that sometimes re-engagement...might be difficult...that it might require some real wrestling.

And his mysterious adversary...in the dream...we are pretty clearly told...that it is...both God and his brother.

While this story is not specifically labeled as a dream...it has many dreamlike qualities...perhaps most notably...the ambiguous...identity of this adversary.

And this beautiful ambiguity...this double identity...is actually pretty clear in the text...when we are told that Jacob has wrestled "with both God and humans."

At the most obvious level...he is wrestling with some kind of representative of God...or even God directly. Jacob almost literally says this: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

And so...this text seems to say...that our engagement with God...that it can sometimes be like wrestling.

And perhaps the lesson is also that...engaging with God is not a passive endeavor. No instead...we need to strive for God.

But of course...Jacob isn't only wrestling...or engaging...with God. Like the Great Commandment...engaging with God alone is not sufficient. We also need to engage with our neighbors...or in this case...with our brothers.

And so here...this mysterious character...also takes on the persona of Esau...which Jacob basically tells us...when he so movingly says to Esau...seeing your face... "is like seeing the face of God."

It does make sense that he would have both God and Esau on his mind...because...he clearly feels badly about his past behavior...and he seeking a fresh blessing...from both.

And finally...we always have the scars to remember our past battles...our past encounters...whether physical...or emotional. And so it too makes sense...that Jacob limps away.

Thus...maybe we can say that this hip injury...is something that he will carry with him...to remind him...of his past behaviors...of his debatable past...and ultimately to remind him of his deliverance.

My guess...is that we can all come up with situations...in our own lives...that call for some kind of re-engagement. Situations where we have...whether purposefully...or not...put ourselves...or someone else...into exile...where we have shunned others.

Or situations...where we have not earnestly called on God for help...have for whatever reason...chosen not to reach out to...not to engage with God.

Well...this remarkable story about our spiritual ancestor...Jacob...maybe it can help us...to figure out...where we need to re-engage.

And maybe it too...can help us realize...that to show our trust in God's grace...we need to reach back...both to our neighbors...and to God.

Maybe it's just like Adam...in that wonderful painting in the Sistine Chapel. Maybe we need to show trust in God's grace...by responding...by reaching out...by engaging.

Maybe we need to do our part...by extending our finger...earnestly reaching back toward the one who is reaching to us...every minute of our lives. Amen.