

Luke 18:9-14
Genesis 32:3-12; 22-32

Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
September 22, 2019 Kim M. Henning
"Jacob's New Name: Israel"

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

I begin with a question: Who is the person God wants you to become? You and I were created, according to Genesis, from the dust of the earth. What is a person to do with that 'dust of the earth'?

If you remember the book of Ecclesiastes, the philosopher does not hold out much hope. **Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes..... The sun rises and the sun goes down.... All things are wearisome...**

The writer of Ecclesiastes does not offer much hope. "Vanity of vanities," he writes. But Ecclesiastes does not have the last word. So let me ask again: "Who does God want you to become with this one precious, irreplaceable life that is yours to live?"

Consider with me that great patriarch of our faith: Jacob. Your ears ought to perk up when you hear Jacob. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

Talk about DNA; Talk about a family tree. It doesn't get much better than Jacob's. We have Abraham who is described elsewhere as being a friend of God. We have Abraham, 'Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the father of many nations.'

And we have Isaac, Jacob's father. Isaac was the late-in-life child born to an 89-year-old mother. Imagine the stories Jacob heard around the campfire regarding his grandparents who left Haran. Imagine the stories he would have heard about God; trusting God, honoring God, and listening to God.

The story of Jacob in the Bible begins as all of our stories begin, 'in the womb.' Do you remember? Rebekah is carrying twins. And the experience of carrying two active children is more than she had bargained for. At one point she says to Isaac, "I wish I was dead."

Those two boys in her womb are battling for space. The discomfort was so real that Rebekah asks, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" Rebekah's pregnancy, it turns out, is a premonition of what is to come.

To Rebekah and Isaac were born two sons. Esau was the first born and 'holding his heel' was Jacob. Esau's name means hairy or red. Jacob's name means 'leg-puller' or 'supplanting.' Jacob and Esau were fraternal twins and that's just the beginning of their differences. Esau was an outdoorsman, a hunter, a man of the field, and his father's favorite child. Jacob was a stay-at-home sort, domestic. AND, Rebekah's favorite. You can feel the trouble that's coming.

On one occasion Esau goes out hunting. You know how it is. Hunters sometimes strike it big, sometimes they come home empty. Esau, once, came home empty handed, but more than that he was famished. Hungry. He barely gets himself home when he smells the stew Jacob had been working on.

“Please, could I have some,” Esau begs. If you don’t know it already, Jacob was a rascal. Some refer to him as a rogue. Remember his name, heel-grabber. Esau’s physical hunger evokes no compassion from Jacob. “No,” he says. “No food.”

Do you see the kind of person Jacob is? It’s I for I and me for me----kind of the way we are born, self-centered. Some would say, ‘success means stepping on others once in a while. Jacob would agree. “You’re hunger? First give me your birthright.”

“What now?” Esau says to himself. “If I die, what good is a birthright?” Esau gives his birthright to his brother. In exchange he received a bowl of stew. And they became like enemies.

Jacob had no interest in the question, “Who is the person God wants you to become?” So think about that. Jacob is just two generations removed from Abraham, the patriarch of faith, and here Jacob acts as if God doesn’t exist.

There’s another story. Isaac was the father of Esau and Jacob. And Isaac was already old when they were born. Now Isaac is blind and near death. So he says to Esau, “I would like to bless you with my very own blessing from God. But before we do that, let’s have a feast. Go out and bring me some meat; we’ll butcher it; we’ll eat; and then I’ll bless you.”

Long story short, Rebekah dresses Jacob with fur so his skin feels hairy like Esau’s. She quickly prepares a meal and Jacob takes it to his father pretending to be Esau. You don’t sound like Esau. I’m Esau. You don’t smell like Esau. I’m Esau. You brought that food back real quick. It was a great hunt. Jacob lies. And steals the blessing.

Yes, Jacob steals the blessing from Esau and Esau is out of control with rage. Esau is so angry that he cannot stand the sight of his brother. Things are so hostile that Rebekah suggests Jacob leave home and live with her brother Laban. And that’s what he did.

Who does God want you to become with this one precious, irreplaceable life you have to life? Jacob runs for his life and I presume he had lots of time to think about that question. The first half of Jacob’s life is kind of a mess. Like football players who after scoring a touchdown point to themselves, Jacob has the art of self-centered living down-pat. And though I don’t know this for sure, it seems as if he’s done a pretty good job of ignoring God as well.

Now the next 20 years of his life are lived away from home. Jacob is introduced to Laban who will become his father-in-law. Now if Jacob thought he was the master swindler, you should meet his father-in-law. Laban made Jacob look like an amateur.

For twenty years Jacob lived keeping one eye over his shoulder. For twenty years, Laban’s cheating must have strangely reminded him of himself. For twenty years, Jacob lived with the anxiety of knowing he couldn’t trust the man. And then one day Jacob discerns that he needs to go home.

In the parable Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, there is that marvelous moment when the younger son ‘came to himself.’ After living twenty years of living with Laban’s self-centeredness, Jacob ‘came to himself’ and said, “I need to go home.” We may not like the Jacob, the heel-grabber; but we have to pay attention to the person Jacob becomes.....

Jacob now, heads home. Did you hear what he did? On the way home Jacob prays..... That is such a moment for any human being who wants to become something beautiful. Jacob prays...

“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac.....I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.” Did you hear that? Where did his humility come from? Jacob prays, “Deliver me, please from the hand of my brother, for I am afraid of him.” First Jacob tells God of his unworthiness; then Jacob says, “I am afraid.”

Don't you love that? We have a totally different Jacob before us. Who does God want us to become? Jacob needs God like you and I need water. Jacob needs God because life is too much to live alone. Jacob needs God because we mortals have barely scathed the surface of life until we allow God to have God's way with us.

Now there's one last piece to the story. And some have said that this is one of the most important stories in the Bible. Jacob, in the dark of the night, is alone. And the story goes that a man wrestled with Jacob that whole evening. All night they wrestle, neither gives up. Two hours, four hours, six hours----they wrestle. Who is stronger? Who will prevail? Who will give up? We have some hints that one is God or at least an angel of God. At one point he touches Jacob's hip and it is dislocated. But Jacob refuses to quit, even with a dislocated hip.

Finally, the angel says, “Let me go, for the sun is about to rise.” Jacob says, “I will not, I will not let you go unless first you bless me.” The angel asks, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” The angel said, “I'm giving you a new name. You shall be called Israel for you have wrestled with God and with human beings and have prevailed.”

Isn't that the best? Jacob, now Israel, discerns within himself that he has to have God in his life. Jacob, now Israel, discerns that life is not easy, faith is not easy, but he has to have God. Jacob, now Israel, that this life is lived fiercely in covenant with God and people.

Who is the person God wants you to become?

We have before us this morning, Jacob, who wrestles with God and with people. Faith does not come easy. Our relationship with God does not come without struggle. Our life lived in faith is life with doubt and pain and darkness. But for heaven's sake, we can't imagine life without God.

Who is the person God wants you to become?

On the evening before his death, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus, we're told, threw himself to the ground. And Jesus, we're told, said, “Father, if it be your will remove this cup from me. Yet nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.

Oh, but to become a person like that. Not my will but your will be done.