There were 35,000 photos taken of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during his presidency, yet only two pictures display FDR in a wheelchair. FDR contracted polio at 39, before his election as president. That meant he was successful in concealing his disability from the public throughout his 12-year presidency. By common, unspoken agreement, the press rarely pictured FDR in a wheelchair. Some of you will recall the controversy when the decision was made to display FDR in a wheelchair at his memorial monument on the mall.

In an earlier day, a president’s private life was considered off limits. Most journalists were aware of John F. Kennedy’s extramarital affairs, yet chose not to publicize them. Can anyone imagine a president today hiding his disability or keeping his philandering out of the news? Not in your wildest dreams! If the public and the media exercised considerable restraint in the past, nothing is considered off limits anymore. Witness the recent scandal over topless pictures of the Duchess of Cambridge. Thomas Jefferson is now thought of as the president with a slave mistress. Our wired world shows no mercy. Why is it that headline news features a steady diet of crime, conflict and scandal? Because it sells! Normalcy is, well, boring.

Heroes exist today only in cartoon form. We use to put our heroes on pedestals and whitewash their flaws. Now we give more credence to the anti-hero who lacks traditional heroic virtues. Where have all our heroes gone?

Peter Gibbon, a researcher at Harvard University, is currently working on a book chronicling the disappearance of heroes from American life. He wrote an article on the same subject entitled, The End of Admiration; the Media and the Loss of Heroes. He asks whether it is possible to recover the sense of the heroic in people while at the same time acknowledging their flaws. He concludes the article this way: “We need to study the past so as not to become arrogant, to remember the good so as not to become cynical….We need to be honest and realistic without losing our capacity for admiration—and to be able to embrace complexity without losing our faith in the heroic.”

The Bible holds our heroes and their corresponding flaws...
together in creative tension. Scripture doesn’t portray our heroes in idealized form. They are presented “warts and all.” There’s no attempt to airbrush sin from their lives. Our Biblical heroes have feet of clay. Consider the record: David is an adulterer, Moses is a murderer and Peter denies Jesus three times in quick succession.

I marvel how the narrator of Genesis, most believe it to be Moses, tells the Biblical story without inserting his editorial comments. I would be tempted to add my two cents worth. There is none of that here in Genesis. It’s the readers’ job to draw out the application for themselves. That’s precisely what we’ll be doing over these next 12 Sundays.

The protagonist in the story, Jacob, is a real character. He hustles his brother’s birthright and matches wits with his father-in-law. He even goes so far as to wrestle an angel all night long to get what he wants. He is, in the words of our sermon title, a born hustler.

Let me forewarn you as we begin, no one fares very well in this story. You could call Abraham’s family the dysfunctional family of God. This story is a tutorial at many points on how not to raise a family.

The Bible does not sanitize its heroes. I trust you will find this fact reassuring. Dysfunctional families predominate in Scripture. You are not required to have it all together for God to show you favor.

The story of Father Abraham and his family comprise 80 percent of the book of Genesis. Our Scripture lesson, in verses 19-20, reminds us that Abraham and Sarah are promised a son. Twenty-five years later, Isaac is born. Verse 20 tells us that Isaac is 40 when he marries Rebekah. They face infertility issues also, waiting 20 years to conceive. Verse 26 reports that Isaac is 60 when his sons are born. Infertility features prominently in this Genesis story. It’s more common than generally acknowledged. According to the Society of Reproductive Medicine, 10 percent of the reproductive population in America suffers from infertility.

Isaac and Rebekah pray about their infertility (25:21). They are convinced God is concerned about such matters and has the resources to do something about it. When they finally conceive, Rebekah learns she is carrying twins. We read in verse 22, “these babies struggled together within her.” The Hebrew verb for struggle expresses violent action. The twins are crashing and smashing into each other in the womb. Rebekah’s futility reaches a crescendo in our text: “If this is the way its gong to be, why go on living?”

God answers her cry with an oracle, in verse 23. There are
not only two babies struggling for the upper hand, but two nations are vying for supremacy. Jacob’s descendants settle in Israel while Esau’s clan locates in Edom, site of modern Jordan today. Their descendants have been battling for supremacy for generations.

God pronounces, in the oracle, that “the elder shall serve the younger.” Inheritance rights were governed by primogeniture laws in the Old Testament. This meant the firstborn son was entitled to double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). As a middle born, something rises up in me to protest this apparent inequity. My sense of injustice is tempered by the reality of the situation. If the inheritance had to be allocated equally among siblings, it would require selling the family farm. The family would lose their livelihood.

Yet, time and again, God subverts the natural order of things. It’s the younger brother, Abel, rather than Cain who receives God’s favor (4:4-5). God maintains his covenant with Abraham’s younger son Isaac rather than his oldest son Ishmael (17:18-19). Later in Genesis, Jacob’s youngest son, Joseph, is the one to whom his older brothers will bow down (42:6).

This intrauterine struggle continues to the day of their delivery. The first one to be born arrives with a shock of red hair, so they name him Esau. The second one to be born, in verse 26, is grabbing the heel of his brother, so they name him Jacob, meaning “the heel grabber.” It’s a portent of things to come. Next Sunday, we’ll explore how this heel-grabbing incident plays out in real time.

Jacob is a born hustler. He’s someone who instinctively knows how to go after what he wants. He is one who is forever kicking his way out. Some of you, as parents and family, know what it’s like to live with strong-willed children. Jacob is the classic strong-willed child. His stubbornness is over the top.

Some of you are, likewise, strong-willed. Like Jacob, you are a real striver. You can be head-strong, stubborn and rather obstinate. Strong-willed is not necessarily a liability. It can help us achieve what we desire. If we do not assert our will, we may not reach our objectives. But it can also be a liability when we refuse to acknowledge God’s way in our lives.

Jacob lives between two contrasting polarities: willingness and willfulness. Will it be my way or God’s way? Will Jacob ever be able to let go of his willfulness and surrender to God’s gracious purposes?

Jesus modeled willingness in Gethsemane before the prospect of the cross. He prayed for this cup of suffering to be removed from his life, yet he
God is the real hero of this story.

came to the point of willingness, “Not my will but yours be done” (Mark 14:36). Willingness expresses openness to God. Have your own way, Lord, in my life.

Willfulness causes a major rupture in Jacob’s family life. He is forced to flee from his homeland to escape the wrath of his brother. This family dispute stretches over 20 years until Jacob is finally willing to let go of his willfulness.

Family conflicts have far-reaching consequences. They can go on for generations. Just as positive family traits are passed down, so are sins. Sin is hereditary, you might say. Anger management issues and deep resentments, addictions and bad habits are passed down from one generation to the next. The Second Commandment warns us that parental sins can be passed down to the third and fourth generations. In other words, my sins not only harm me but are passed down to my children and my grandchildren, even to the fourth generation—to great grandchildren.

If we aren’t intentional about making a conscious break from generational patterns, family sins will be passed down to future generations. It takes someone in the family willing to rise up and put a stop to it. We can’t continually perpetuate patterns of resentment; we must let them go. We can’t repeatedly offer safe harbor to anger; we must release it. We can’t keep self-medicating with alcohol or other stimulants without doing irreparable harm to future generations.

We need God’s help in overcoming deeply entrenched sin. C.S. Lewis wrote, “Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is…We never find out the strength of an evil impulse until we try to fight it.”

Our sermons over the next 12 Sundays focus on this “Life is Messy” theme. I talked about life’s messiness in a sermon two Sundays ago and the video that was sent your way a few days ago Family dynamics are messy. Interpersonal relationships are messy. Office politics are messy.

Jacob’s mess (and ours) doesn’t disqualify us from the life God intends for us. In the final analysis, Jacob is not the hero of this story; God is the real hero. God transforms Jacob’s life from willfulness to willingness. God is often working in this story off-stage and behind the scenes to redeem this strong-willed hustler into a willing servant of God. You may be in a messy family dynamic or work situation at the moment. Be of good cheer, God prevails. Messy people are precisely the ones God comes to save.