We are in a sermon series called “Life is Messy.” We have been following the life of Jacob, the “grabber,” or “supplanter.” The power struggles and conflict in Jacob’s story may seem ludicrous or over the top, but the essence of the story reflects a theme common to humanity: people want desperately to control their lives and their futures.

Some of us are involved in conflicted relationships in our marriages or families. And, frankly, much of this boils down to a power struggle over who gets to maintain control. As a parent, I am very aware that I can’t control my children’s choices or protect them from every difficulty or conflict and, frankly, that’s hard. As a pastor, I see people going through disorienting experiences, such as broken relationships, illness, grief, financial problems, job loss. But the messiness of life is not just personal. The economy, the conflicts around the world, not to mention hurricanes and other natural disasters, can all leave us feeling vulnerable and out of control. Life is messy, so the story of Jacob has a lot to say to us.

I want to review the story briefly. We have seen how Jacob comes from a dysfunctional family in which his parents play favorites. He is the second-born twin, a circumstance he can’t control. But Jacob grabs control by manipulating his brother, Esau, into giving up his birthright and deceiving his father to steal the blessing that was meant for the firstborn. Esau becomes so angry he wants to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees to his uncle’s home to save his life and to find a wife. In his Uncle Laban, Jacob the trickster meets his match. Here is an outline for the narrative of Jacob’s sojourn in Haran:

29:1-4 preliminary meeting—a kiss of meeting
29:15-20 meeting with Laban and contract
29:21-30 deception of Jacob by Laban
29:31—30:24 the offspring
30:25-43 trick of Laban by Jacob
(31:1-16 is a theological reflection)
31:17-42 meeting with Laban and dispute
31:17-42 covenant and departure—a kiss of departure.
What is clear is that God is in control, bringing forth life.

The initial meeting with his uncle Laban is friendly and affectionate—it actually begins with a kiss. But what was first considered a familial relationship soon becomes a business contract in which Jacob agrees to work seven years for Laban so he can then marry Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel. At the eleventh hour, Laban deceives Jacob, giving his older daughter, Leah, instead. Laban makes another contract, saying Jacob can have Rachel as well if he works an additional seven years. The conflict continues as the two sisters vie for attention and their place in this new family in the midst of the messiness of both birth and barrenness.

The passage Pete preached on last week is the center of the entire Jacob narrative, because the children that are born represent the fulfillment of God’s promise to bless this family and, through this family, to bless the entire world. This sojourn to Haran was at first understood to be a way of escaping the wrath of Jacob’s brother, Esau. But now we know that underlying all this human messiness, God is in control, and He is bringing forth the fulfillment of the promise first to Abraham—that his descendants would outnumber the stars. What is clear is that God is in control, bringing forth life.

Today’s passage marks a turning point. We see that once Joseph is born, Jacob decides it is time to go back home—to the land that was also a part of the blessing. This return will become a key theme for the reminder of the story. In view of his service, he asks Laban to give him his wives and children and “let him go,” echoing Moses’ words to Pharaoh. Jacob understandably wants to separate so that he can provide for his own family himself. But, undoubtedly, he also wants to get away from the tight grip and ongoing conflict with his father-in-law. Notice in the outline that the events related to Jacob’s departure from Haran mirror earlier events recording his coming to Haran.

The interaction between Laban and Jacob involves willful posturing to determine who will be in control. Laban is used to getting what he wants—buying what he wants, so he tries to persuade Jacob to stay. Laban says, “If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me.” One commentator points out the humor in this story as listeners would laugh with the success of their hero Jacob, and laugh at the antagonist. Laban may be seeking to claim some kind of special spiritual power by saying he’s learned by divination….But the truth is that all he had to do was look!

Jacob responds with his own little quip, revealing his own sense of self-assurance, “For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly;
God is pouring out His grace to accomplish for Jacob what he cannot accomplish on his own.

and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned.” This is not only funny but does contain an important theological point. God is the giver of prosperity. And it is given through the person of Jacob. Laban is dependent on Jacob for the gift of God’s blessing.

Laban is losing his grip, though not by choice. He is doing all that he can to hang on to Jacob and his family and the prosperity they have brought him. He’s determined to cut a deal and find out what he can give to pay Jacob. But Jacob will not be bought or beholden to Laban in any way; he is going to take his own chances with his good fortune. He recognizes Laban’s tight grip and realizes that he won’t let him go easily, so he devises a cunning plan that will get him out of the country and provide for his family’s future. In all this, the deceiver who has been deceived turns the tables one more time. Jacob is tightening his grip. He refuses any wages, but agrees to work for Laban if, at the end, he can take the multicolored animals and black sheep from the flock he tends.

Since animals with such markings are uncommon, Laban thinks he has a deal, but just to be on the safe side, he puts all the colored animals under the care of his sons—a three-day journey away. Laban is going to hold on to his grip of wealth and affluence by attempting to trick Jacob again.

Now I confess that when I first read about Jacob’s plan to produce colored animals, I wondered what is this all about. But the actions are not meant to be explained or understood. They are meant to evoke amazement.

The attentive listener knows Jacob’s success comes not from his magic or his manipulation but from the God who has promised to be with him and to bless him. God is pouring out His grace to accomplish for Jacob what he cannot accomplish on his own. Does Jacob know that? Yes and no. I think Jacob recognizes God’s presence in his life and he does believe. Remember the encounter he had back in chapter 28, when he had the vision of the angels ascending and descending on a ladder? When Jacob awoke, he made a vow. “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God” (Genesis 28:20-21). Jacob’s vow reflects his desire to maintain control and have a conditional relationship with God: In essence, he was willing to “believe” in God as long as he could keep his grip on his life and his future and as long as God continued to do for him what Jacob expected Him to do.

Jacob’s actions indicate a continued desire to maintain
control of his grip on the future. The story of Jacob almost seems a little over the top, but then I think of all the ways we all do the same things. We want to maintain control of our lives. In essence, we believe it’s all up to us. We have to get a grip and to make sure we get what’s coming to us or to maintain control by alleviating the pain or inner anxiety.

As I was thinking about this text this week and contemplating how it related to our 21st-century sensibilities, I wondered if, years from now, people will look back on our attachment to technology and think our lives and actions are as peculiar as Jacob’s actions with the rods are to us. I was watching a sitcom last week in which one of the characters was in a car accident due to texting, so the judge decreed that his punishment would fit the crime. He would not be allowed to use technology for a week. Since he couldn’t use technology, he talked about it incessantly. Finally, a coworker said, “You have a real problem. What is it you are trying to avoid through such excessive use of technology?” The man confessed that his own life wasn’t going so well, so it was just easier to distract himself. Many people seek to control their lives and mask inner pain through addictions to technology, alcohol, drugs, food, sex, TV, or work and so on.

The issue of control is addressed in David Benner’s wonderful book, Desiring God’s Will: Aligning Your Heart with the Heart of God. He writes:

When it comes right down to it, there are really only two possible prayers that can be prayed. One is entirely natural, one is absolutely supernatural. Whether we choose to pray or not, one of these will be praying itself. The choice is not whether to pray. The choice is which prayer to pray. The prayer that comes most naturally for all of us is “My name be hallowed, my kingdom come, my will be done.” This is a prayer of independence and willfulness. It is the liturgy of the kingdom of self.

The prayer that goes against our nature and that can become our prayer only through the action of divine grace is the Lord’s Prayer. It inverts everything in the liturgy of the kingdom of the self—“Thy name be hallowed, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” It is a prayer of surrendered autonomy and willingness. It is the liturgy of the kingdom of God.

I am struck by how both Laban and Jacob are operating under the kingdom of self. They are both gripping their own agendas, possessions and strategies and even using the people around them to get what they want and to secure their futures. What is so interesting about this story is that Jacob

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The way to healing and wholeness comes by losing your grip.

Reading and reflecting on Jacob has been an interesting experience for me, because my story intersects with this story. I am a twin. I’m the younger twin, and the less dominant twin. People ask me what it’s like to be a twin, and I respond, “What is it like to not be a twin?” It’s all I have ever known, and it has shaped my identity for good and for ill. Though my sister and I are truly best of friends and have been our whole lives, we have also had our differences and learned ways of maneuvering around each other.

My sister got married a decade before me as did most of my friends and cousins, so as a young adult, I wrestled with issues related to marriage and singleness. After marrying at age 30, I struggled with infertility for years and questioned why God would give children to some but not to me. And after feeling called to ministry and completing seminary, I spent 18 months working as a temp doing data entry at a bank, waiting for my first call to a church. In my mid-30s, I hit a wall, a kind of wilderness of the soul that left me questioning God, questioning myself, questioning the meaning of life. I remember, at one point, crying out to the Lord, “I can’t hang on much longer. I’m holding on by a thread, and I’m about to lose my grip.” I had a profound spiritual experience—a deep awareness of the presence of God with me and his voice—not an audible voice but clearly the Lord assuring me and saying, “Glenda, it is not you who is holding on to me, but I am holding on to you. I have a very firm grip, and I will never let you go.”

I had known and believed for a long time that God loved me and nothing could separate me from His love. I had known that I belonged to God. But the messiness of my life, this journey of struggle, culminated with an experiential kind of knowing that brought me to a deeper trust in Christ, a deeper awareness of his love, and a greater reliance on his grace. The Apostle Paul was a religious person like Jacob who believed in God, but, by his own admission, he had a tight grip of control on his relationship with God. But that all changed with an encounter with the resurrected Christ. He describes his own experience of religious control and the letting go in Philippians 3:5-9: “Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of...
We are saved by grace—God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves.

Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

The Apostle Paul knew and understood that losing your group is essential to the journey of faith. As spiritual director and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, “All truly great spirituality is about letting go.”

There is another famous person in history who was much like Paul, and it is good to remember him today on this Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Church in Germany, and in doing so, he challenged the Roman Catholic Church to reform some of its practices and its theology. His act sent shock waves throughout Europe, stirring up long-smoldering desires for change and causing reform to burst forth.

It is important to realize that Luther had no desire to start a new church but merely to affirm the gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries, the church had come to teach that works were required in order to be saved. Luther worked hard to be a serious and devout monk trying to live a worthy religious life believing he had to maintain control, but he was miserable. When he read Romans, he, too, learned that losing your grip is necessary in the life of faith. It is not who we are or what we have done that matters. What matters is faith in Christ and what he has done for us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Salvation, like life itself, is a gift of God. We are saved by grace—God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. We receive the gift through faith alone. Faith is accepting the acceptance we already have in Christ. Gratitude is our response to grace—giving back to the Lord, recognizing all that he has given to us in Christ.

I don’t know what circumstances you find yourself in today, but I’m sure you can attest to the truth that life is indeed messy. Storms of life can be literal, like an oncoming hurricane, but they can also come in marriage struggles, relational crises, financial and job insecurity, ill health, grief, and uncertainty about the future for any reason. These are experiences in our real, very human lives.

David Benner writes in his book, Desiring God’s Will: Aligning Your Heart with the Heart of God: “Rejoice every time you discover a new area of your life that you cannot change but would naturally wish you could. For in this
We belong to God. He has a very firm grip on us and will never let us go.

weakness and inability, you have the opportunity to fall into the hands of the living God. You will not fall as long as you cling to the illusion of self-control and mastery. But neither will you discover that you are held. Accept the good news that it is in your weakness that God’s power is perfected.”

Another way of saying it is this: Life is messy, but God prevails. Losing your grip feels very threatening and vulnerable, but it is the opportunity to fall into the hands of the living God and to discover that we are held by the grace of Christ accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. We belong to God. He has a very firm grip on us and will never let us go. Amen.