Did we just read these verses correctly? With all that we’ve been through in the Jacob Story and the Life is Messy Sermon Series, Jacob is going back to Bethel? Beth-El, which means House (or Place) of God—Beth, as in house/place, and El, as in God—Bethel. Really, God actually took time (in God’s busy schedule) to speak to this conniving, deceiving son-of-a-gun? Yes. God actually took time to speak into Jacob’s life? Yes. And look, Jacob actually listened to God. Jacob listened to God telling him to go back to Bethel. Remember Bethel? It’s the place, about 20 hard years ago, where Jacob ends up after being on the run from his seething brother Esau, whom Jacob has cheated out of his birthright and his father’s blessing. It is Bethel where Jacob ends up late at night; he lays his head down on a rock and is transported into a dream.

There’s a ladder reaching up into heaven, with colorful angels on it, moving up and down. God speaks to Jacob in the dream, saying that “the land that he’s in will belong to Jacob and his family, and that Jacob’s family will become a great nation and will bless ALL other nations on earth!” Then God leaves a P.S., saying to Jacob before he awakens, “Know this, Jacob, I’ll stay with you, I’ll protect you wherever you go, and I’ll bring you back to this very ground. I’ll stick with you until I’ve done everything I promised you” (Genesis 28:15, The Message). Jacob awakens from the dream, awestruck, and declares, “Truly, God is in this place, and I didn’t even know it!” Hence, Bethel – the place of God, where a faithful God reveals Himself to Jacob.

In these verses, as we close out this sermon series, we’re looking at a transformed life. Jacob is a new man. Yes, he’s got a bum hip, a crooked stride; but he’s a new man. Jacob is the prodigal son returning home to his Father. Pretty much, up to now, Jacob has done what he’s wanted to do. Jacob has gone where he has wanted to go, into foreign lands, mixing it up with the Canaanites and Hittites, immersing himself in foreign customs and gods. But it is God now directing Jacob’s course. It is God who is leading and Jacob who is following. Grabbing for most of his life, Jacob now wants to grab hold of God’s plan for his life. He’s worn down by a life of running away from a brother, from an
Jacob’s Spiritual Growth Plan…

Throw out all foreign gods, take a good bath, and put on some clean clothes!

uncle/father-in-law. Worn down by a life of running away from God, Jacob is now running towards God, to the place of blessing and belonging. He’s so captured by God that Jacob now has a deliberate plan in preparing to return to Bethel. Jacob has a “spiritual growth plan.”

Jacob’s Spiritual Growth Plan is for his entire family. It’s a three-part Plan! Throw out all foreign gods, take a good bath, and put on some clean clothes! With new resolve, Jacob is looking to make a complete break from his old life, his old ways. Before heading towards Bethel, he’s wanting to “clean house.”

First, Jacob tells his family to rid themselves of idols. You know, stuff that takes the place of God, stuff that we desire or prioritize over God. Second, Jacob tells his family to purify themselves, as in an outward washing, which represents an inward cleansing from their dirty, messy lives. We know it as the process of penance—of coming clean, of laying down our burdens and brokenness before a Loving, Merciful God. Third, Jacob and his family have to change their clothes. It is symbolically leaving behind old sin-infected clothes and, instead, putting on garments of righteousness (all the way down to casting off their lucky-charm earrings). The short of it, Jacob’s Spiritual Growth Plan, for him and his family, is the active process of casting off those things which grieved the heart of God. It’s the active process of ridding themselves of the habits that hindered their walk with God.

In this same spirit, we’ve got a Spiritual Growth Plan to live out together. It was Pastor Pete’s heartfelt invitation to each one of us back in September, when we started the Jacob story and this “Life Is Messy” series. Remember, he shared the statistic that 81 percent of Christians really don’t have a plan for growing in Christ. It’s the invitation to actively engage in an intentional daily, week-by-week plan of becoming more like Christ, for Christ and for others! So, here’s a picture of our Spiritual Growth Plan at VPC. It’s grounded on our mission and vision of “Becoming Like Christ, Together, For the World.” Your Session and Deacons, your Support Staff and Directors and Pastors – ALL of us invite you and join you in this Spiritual Growth Plan. Just like Jacob’s growth plan, our VPC Spiritual Growth Plan has three steps.

First, “Becoming Like Christ” means taking intentional, daily time with God. You might already be doing this in some form or another right now; or, maybe you’d like to grow in any one of these areas. Becoming Like Christ means taking regular time with God in daily prayer and reading of Scripture. It’s taking time in
We cannot move forward in our life with God without first leaving something behind!

quiet moments (in the mornings or evenings) to be with God, face-to-face, heart-to-heart. It’s about turning everything else off and tuning into God.

Second, “Becoming Like Christ” together means taking time in community with other sisters and brothers in Christ. Take time for Sunday worship together, take intentional time to be in a growth group, or Bible study, or class here (on Sundays, or throughout the week). Or, it’s taking regular time to get together with good “spiritual friends” to share prayer, food and fellowship with one another. Take time for meaningful, deepening relationships.

Third, “Becoming Like Christ, Together, for the World” means taking intentional time to do the work of Christ out into the world. Part of our Spiritual Growth Plan is using our time, talents and resources for loving and serving in the name of Jesus inside and outside our community. “For The World” can mean participating in a ministry team or opportunity right here within the walls of this church; or it can mean engaging in a “faith in action” project out beyond these walls. “For the World” means loving and serving your neighbor right next to you right now, or your neighbor next door to you (when you get home), or your neighbor across town, on the street, in the grocery store, in your office building; or your neighbor can be on the other side of the globe!

Take intentional, regular time to do The Work of Christ Out Into the World. Let’s not be a part of the 81 percent!

Time with God. Time in Community. Time to do the work of Christ in the World. This is our Spiritual Growth Plan here, yours and mine. Becoming Like Christ, Together, For the World. Now a word of encouragement about this plan. We learn about it from Jacob and his return to Bethel. We cannot move forward in our life with God without first leaving something behind (Greg McDonald). In order for Jacob to move forward towards Bethel—to a place with God—Jacob had to leave behind idols, and self-focused habits, and old clothes that no longer fit his healthier, holier person. Similarly, you and I cannot make progress in daily transformation until we willingly put down and leave behind stuff that keeps us from getting closer to God—those harmful habits, unhealthy attachments, other obsessions, other gods. We cannot move forward in our life with God without first leaving something behind!

Another word of encouragement. Jacob, nor you, nor I come to a Spiritual Growth Plan by our own doing. Jacob, there in Shechem, or you and I here in Vienna cannot do anything at all to bring about our own transformed lives. It’s
God loves us not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

not even close. It’s not possible. God and God’s patient and gracious work in Jacob’s life, and in your life, are what makes a transformed life possible. Amidst all the heel-grabbing and petty swindling, Jacob remembered the first time he met God at Bethel, some 20 years ago, when he received God’s blessing. More recently in his story, Jacob remembers that wrestling match, and his face-to-face, real-life meeting with God. It’s what captured Jacob’s heart and what reminded Jacob that God is God, and that Jacob is, well, so in need of God. Jacob’s eyes are on God’s eyes, Jacob’s source for transformation.

God is Jacob’s one and only source for his transformation. We need God, too. Like Jacob, we, too, need God to break into our self-absorbed lives. We need God to reach out to us, as God did with Jacob, and even wrestle with us. We need God to reveal Himself to us, so that, like Jacob, we might come face-to-face with the God who rescues and redeems and restores. Remember God’s blessing and promise to Jacob? It’s God’s blessing and promise to us, too: “Know this, Jacob, I’ll stay with you, I’ll protect you wherever you go, and I’ll bring you back to this very ground. I’ll stick with you until I’ve done everything I promised you.”

God’s patient work throughout Jacob’s life has resulted in a transformed life for Jacob, which may have seemed way out of reach in his earlier years! Be encouraged. God moves you and me along, step-by-step in the process of spiritual growth (even when we might not even know it, or recognize it). Sometimes, we may look back with shame or regret at things we have done or not done. We might look back and recognize just how naïve, or shallow, or selfish we’ve been, or are. We may regret wasted time, missed opportunities, unhealthy choices. Life is Messy, but God Prevails. Thank God for God’s patience and promise that we are God’s, we belong to God, and that God has purposes and plans for each one of us not yet realized (World Vision Bible).

Jacob is now heading towards Bethel, like a prodigal returning home. We, too, are like the prodigal, much of the time. And God is standing there, open and ready. He is scanning the horizon, and He catches sight of you. And He is running out to meet you (do you see Him?); and without hearing any excuses or confessions, the Father throws His arms around you, a full embrace, with a lasting kiss… welcoming you home (Luke 15).

God doesn’t love Jacob because of who Jacob is. God doesn’t love you, or me, because of who we are. God loves us not because of who we are, but because of who God is. One way of saying what God
And it is by God’s extravagant grace that Jesus was born into this messy world at all, to come and be with us, to rescue and redeem us.

does in loving us, is “It’s on the house.” Or, “it’s by grace,” what God does in loving us, with arms wide open, a full embrace and a kiss. Just as it is by grace that it was Jacob (of all people!) who became not only the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, but who became the many times great-grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth (Buechner). And it is by God’s extravagant grace that Jesus was born into this messy world at all, to come and be with us, to rescue and redeem us. He comes, with arms open wide, outstretched…to love us. And, more about that next Sunday!