

## THE GIFT

TEXTS: Genesis 33:1-17, Luke 15:11-32

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 9, 2020*

Last week we left our hero, Jacob, wrestling with the angel at the ford of the Jabbok River. Jacob had been blissfully heading back home, with his large family and the wealth he had accumulated—mostly through less-than-honest means. But on the way, he learns that his twin brother, Esau, has never forgotten that Jacob had stolen both his birthright and blessing decades earlier and is marching toward him with 400 armed men.

With that looming threat to Jacob's life, the Bible pulls us out of the regular pace of the story for a slow, symbolic night of wrestling at the end of Genesis 32. Everything else fades into the background as we watch Jacob struggle with God, his past, his fears for the future, his life-long attempt to be someone he is not, and to figure out who he—Jacob—really is. He comes out of that dark night with a new name. The angel changes his name from Jacob to Israel. He's blessed, but that blessing has come at a cost. He's limping from the struggle, even though the Bible tells us that he actually emerged the victor, which is strange when you think about it.

Jacob gets the blessing from the angel after the angel tells him that he has "striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." If you take that literally, that could lead to some pretty terrible theology about the nature of God, if even someone as flawed as Jacob could essentially beat God. But when you realize that this story is a visual representation of Jacob's inner struggle over his own identity, both as the grandson of Abraham who bears the promise of God and as someone who's not lived up to that calling even with those in his own family, then it makes more sense. After a long struggle that left him wounded, Jacob comes out of that night with an attitude adjustment and the knowledge not just of his privilege but of the responsibility to right the wrongs he has committed that comes with it. He also comes out with the courage to finally cross the river and the humility to approach his brother as his servant.

As the brothers meet, we see that one of the Jewish interpretations of the wrestling match—that Jacob was wrestling not just any angel but the guardian angel of Esau—might well be correct. Perhaps Esau spent the night before searching his own heart for what it meant to be a grandson of Abraham and someone God promised would be given his own nation of people as descendants. Was violence toward his brother a way to honor that promise? Should he revel in his brother's humiliation? Make him beg?

In Genesis 33:4 we're told that instead of any of that, "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." I can't read those words without my mind fast-forwarding two thousand years to a parable Jesus tells in Luke 15. We've come to call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son or sometimes just the Parable of the Lost Son, since it's part of a series of parables in Luke 15 about the importance of finding the lost—a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son.

The parable has so many similarities to this story of Jacob and Esau that I've often wondered if Jesus didn't have it in his mind when he told the parable. In both cases you have a wealthy man with two sons. In both cases the younger of those sons behaves badly with his inheritance, dishonoring the father and enraging the older brother. In both cases the younger son arrives at a moment of reckoning when his life is in danger, swallows his pride, and heads for home with a humble heart. And in both cases, that humility is greeted, not with gloating or punishment, but with the one who has been harmed the most running to embrace the wayward son and lifting him back into full relationship.

In the world of faith, both of those stories are illustrations of what we call grace. Grace by definition is undeserved. It is pure gift. We don't earn grace. We can't. If we earn it, it's no longer grace, but simply receiving what we're due. And in both of these stories we're meant to connect the grace given to the younger son with the gift of God. Jacob says to Esau, "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." And in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father in the story is meant to represent the way God receives us when we're lost and can finally admit that to ourselves and to others.

But both stories also show us that we humans often have trouble with God's amazing grace. In both stories, the God figures—Esau in Genesis and the father in Luke—offer full grace. There is no holding back in the embrace; no sense that the one who was harmed has filed away the grievance to bring out at a later time. It happened, the one doing the harm has shown through their actions that they recognize the harm they have caused, and full relationship is back on the table.

The father in Jesus' parable symbolizes that grace with the offer of a robe, a ring, and a great feast of welcome—gifts the Prodigal accepts.

Grace offered—grace received. Esau, backs up his offer of grace with concrete action. Esau says to Jacob, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you." But Jacob doesn't accept the offer, saying that he'll be moving too slowly. "Oh, no, I couldn't really. I mean look how frail everyone is—the flocks and herds are nursing—they couldn't stand the pace." Never mind that the night before he drove them all across the river ahead of him, potentially into the hands of Esau's army. Nope. Esau, you just go on. We weaklings will just hobble along behind you. We'll meet you in Seir, which was the home of the Edomites—Esau's family.

Esau tries again. "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." In other words, "A few soldiers then? If you're in such bad shape, surely you could use some help." Jacob refuses that, too. If you had any remaining questions about Esau's motive in wanting to keep an armed force with his brother, they vanish as Esau doesn't protest this but simply leaves and returns home. And if you thought Jacob was being totally honest in his concern for those he had with him, those are erased in the final line of the story where Jacob does not in fact go to meet his brother in Seir, nor does he travel to the home of their father, Isaac, who's still hanging in there. Instead Jacob goes to Succoth, settles in, and builds himself a house. This is the last time the twins will see each other until they come together to bury their father at the end of Genesis 35. And with Isaac's death we see no further contact between the brothers in the Bible. By the end of the Hebrew Scriptures their descendants are at war.

Jacob shows us how hard it is to receive a **gift**, as opposed to an earned **wage**. Gifts create relationships; and relationships have responsibilities. By accepting a gift, we're accepting some level of relationship with a person, and real relationship asks things of us. It asks that we consider more than just ourselves, that we treat the other fairly, and it acknowledges that our community has expanded—that the circle of who we consider worthy of mutual time and attention has been drawn more widely. When we accept a gift, we accept that expanded world of relationship and responsibility. When we refuse a gift, we refuse not just a thing or a service, but the relationship that is offered with it and the responsibility to include the gift giver within our circle of care.

My former in-laws were kind and generous people, but Christmas was always a time when I came away from our celebrations with them wounded because they could not and would not accept a gift from either me or my husband. One Christmas in particular stood out for me. We'd gone to their Pennsylvania home to spend the holiday. My husband was a university professor, and I was a bookstore manager. It was well within our ability to give Christmas gifts to his parents.

But we knew how they were. They gave to us extravagantly—all the time. But to give back anything but a thank you seemed impossible. Still, we were not struggling students anymore, and it was Christmas, so we tried a modest gift. We got a briefcase for his dad and a scarf for his mom. Christmas morning, they opened their gifts, admired them, and thanked us. But when it came time to return home and we went to load the car, there were the briefcase and the scarf put with our suitcases. "We don't need them. You shouldn't spend your money."

It felt like a body blow. I didn't really understand then why it hit so hard. "It's just...things," I thought. Then I thought maybe it was just my own vanity—wanting to be seen as someone who could afford to give gifts. And maybe that was mixed in. But it was more. Their refusal to accept even a modest gift when they themselves gave extravagantly, sent the message that they were uninterested in any kind of mutual relationship. They were benefactors, and as a recipient I was somehow less-than. They could give or not give as they saw fit. Accepting a gift would have acknowledged a responsibility for mutual respect and care. A relationship; not a transaction. For whatever reason, they couldn't do it. And it hurt.

Now, after years of walking with people in congregations, I've seen how those who struggle to receive the gifts of others, whether material gifts or gifts of care and service, also struggle to fully accept the gift of God's grace. Freely giving **and** receiving is at the foundation of every sacrament of the church, grounded in God's ultimate self-giving in Jesus. What the liturgy and rituals of the church are supposed to teach us is the lesson that Jacob couldn't quite complete. We don't receive the fulness of the gift unless and until we accept the responsibilities of mutual relationship.

Jacob recognized the enormous grace of his twin and realized that such was the face of God. With grateful relief he accepted the gift of his life, which Esau could have easily taken, and justifiably so. But for Jacob it was a one-time deal; a transaction. Jacob returned the wealth and status he had stolen and Esau stood down. Esau offered to go further—to accompany and protect his brother and enter the full responsibility of relationship, but Jacob was not. If he'd accepted his brother's offer, Jacob might have avoided one of the ugliest stories in the Bible, which follows in the next chapter.

With Jesus' parable, it isn't the Prodigal who has the issue, it is his older brother, and his problem isn't with the receiving, it's with the giving. The brother can't distinguish between gifts and wages. He thinks grace must be earned, so he's deeply offended at his father's extravagant welcome of the Prodigal. The brother sees that gift as cheapening what he himself has received from his father over the years. He's tallying up who has earned what, and when the deeds don't match the wage, he cries foul.

Grace is not a wage. It's a gift. And gifts are about the love of the giver, not the worthiness of the recipient. By definition, you can't earn a gift. The self-giving of God in Jesus is scandalous precisely because it doesn't have to be earned by some heroic act on our part; and when we accept it, we accept both the loving relationship and the responsibilities that go with it. That God would draw a circle of mutual relationship wide enough to include every single one of us, that there is nothing that can possibly separate any of us from the love of God, is the amazing good news that we call the Gospel. If we confuse gifts with wages, we can have trouble with God's extravagant giving to others. If we don't understand ourselves to be God's beloved, we can have trouble receiving the gift. But it doesn't stop there.

Zoom out further and we begin to see not only why we have trouble as individuals but also why we're so bad in the larger relationships between our various social groups and identities. As a society we praise individual benefactors, patrons, donors; we value the power conferred by wealth and the discipline required to give some of it up. We actually expect that those with the most wealth will form foundations and give to others. I remember when Bill Gates was basically hounded into starting the Gates Foundation. But many find it offensive to expect government and even corporate entities to be generous with what they have. We bristle at asking corporations to offer even an appropriate and equally-portioned wage, let alone a gift of more vacation time, family leave, or better health insurance. Where once workers had relationships with employers with mutual responsibilities; it's now all just transaction.

And woe be unto you if you are not deemed to have earned food assistance or unemployment help or a roof over your head. As a country, any sense of giving has totally left the building. Government gifts are stingy and require the humiliation of the recipient, and to get even that, they must meet whatever criteria is set for deeming them “worthy.” It’s evident that simply being in need is not one of those qualifying criteria. In fact, often great need is disqualifying, since too many view poverty as a kind of moral failing, an attitude that has wormed its way into the church in the form of the “prosperity Gospel.” And to talk about restoring wealth to those from whom it was stolen, as Jacob did for Esau even in that simple transaction for the sake of stopping violence? It’s a scandal to mention.

The road to healing our relationships at all levels requires us to go back to square one, to the gift of life we received from the one who made us, and discover what it means both to give and to receive. Without both pieces of that act, we’re left going our separate ways like Abraham’s twin grandsons. And without a full understanding of the nature of a gift, we’ll remain like the whiny older brother in the parable. “How come he gets all the good stuff! I’ve been more faithful than he has. What about me, me, me???”

There is joy at the end of this struggle. There is grace. There is the warm embrace of a father for his wayward son and the ability to see the face of God, even in the one marching toward us with a hostile army. But before we can receive that blessing, we must empty ourselves, enter the ford of the Jabbok, and wrestle a new name out of the God who meets us there.

That’s what we’ll be doing together over these next weeks. That journey will begin next week we, when we’ll meet God’s Spirit hovering over a formless, chaotic, void, when only darkness lay over the face of the deep. Come with me. Buckle up and join me in the ford of the Jabbok. Angels await; and, after the struggle, the amazing grace will lead us home. Amen.