

The Gift

TEXT: Genesis 33:1-17; Luke 15:11-32

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on September 21, 2025

We come to week three of our look at Jacob's hard-won transformation from a deceitful, greedy young adult to the still-imperfect, but much better, patriarch of the twelve tribes that will bear his new name, Israel.

We left Jacob last week emerging from the ford of the Jabbok River, after a grueling, symbolic night of wrestling with God at the end of Genesis 32. Everything else faded into the background as we watched 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 was.

He came out of that dark night with a new name. The angel or God or whoever it was, changes his name from Jacob, the “heel-grabber,” to Israel, which means either “He retains God” or “God is upright.” But, in either case, a much better fit for the bearer of God's promise than “heel-grabber.”

Jacob also comes out with the courage to finally leave the neither-here-nor-there space of the ford and cross the river. His new limp—the very visible wound from that encounter—also gives him the humility he needs to approach his brother—who, if you recall, is waiting for him on the other side with an army of 400 armed men.

Remember, that as Jacob himself approaches his brother Esau, his plan to try to butter him up has been playing out. Before the night of wrestling, Jacob had sent half of his wealth—over 500 flocks and herds—ahead of him in waves, each wave attended by a servant bowing and scraping to Esau as they presented their gift as given by Jacob, who they referred to as Esau's servant.

And now, at last, the twins meet for the first time in 14 years. Jacob alone, Esau with an army and very good reason to wipe his brother off the face of the earth, gifts or no gifts.

Nowhere in the story do we get anything about what Esau was thinking through all this. It's possible that Esau spent the night before searching his own heart for what it meant to be a grandson of Abraham and someone God also promised would be given his own nation of people as descendants. That was the secondary blessing Isaac was able to give Esau after Jacob stole the larger one. Was violence toward his brother a way to honor that blessing? 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, offering himself as a servant instead of a family member. 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 offering to lift 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* earn grace. If we earn it, it's no longer grace, but simply receiving what we're due—if we've earned it, it's a wage, not a gift.

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." 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 are finally able to 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 back later. 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 but the brother resents, because the elder brother still confuses gifts and wages. The older brother doesn't want grace for his sibling. He wants his brother to get what he deserved. But that is not the father's way in the parable. And the one in need of the father's grace—the prodigal—gets it. Grace offered—grace received, fully, gratefully, and without reservation.

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." They had separated years ago in fear and anger, but they would return home together, as reconciled brothers.

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 Jacob 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 Jacob's refusal 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 parting of the ways in Genesis 33 is the last time the twins will see each other until they come together to bury their father, Isaac, 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**. A wage is a conditional transaction. You do x and you will be compensated with y for your trouble. And that's essentially what Jacob did. He presented waves of gifts to his brother, paying back at least some of what he stole, and hoping that his life might be spared in return.

It was, and Jacob accepted that as his wage. But the fuller grace that Esau offered—the thing Jacob in no way deserved—the loving embrace, the invitation to return home as reconciled brothers, Jacob could not accept that.

Different cultures have a wide variety of gift-giving traditions, some of which can be supercharged with expectations and obligations. But those traditions can easily distort the understanding of God's gifts, which are always an expression of love and goodwill that are freely given.

Gifts, by definition, are not required; nothing is required in return; and whether or not the recipient deserves the gift in some way is not part of the equation. At all. God offers grace to all people at all times; and we can simply reach out and accept it, as the Prodigal did, refuse it, as many do, or kinda-sorta take it and try to pay for it, as Jacob does, which makes his life quite a bit harder going forward. In fact, one of the more horrific stories in the Bible happens in the very next chapter; an event that likely would not have happened, had the brothers traveled together.

But perhaps the trickiest thing about gifts—is that the cycle of love they represent, and the transformations in individuals and societies they can create, is only possible when a gift is accepted. The gift says, “I love you,” and the acceptance says, “I love you back,” which is, I would argue, the core of the Gospel message and the root of its transformative power. But one of the great ironies is that some of the greatest givers struggle with everything within them to accept a gift, especially if the gift is an offer of help, from someone else.

While Paul tells the faithful in Acts that “it is more blessed to give than to receive,” the only way anyone ever gets to experience the joy of giving is if there are those who are equally joyful to receive the gift.

Giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin; and if we keep giving but are unwilling to receive from others, we are gumming up the works just as much as if we hoard for ourselves and are unwilling to give in the first place. We become a blocked channel for God’s grace. God’s gifts must be able to flow both in and out for them to be effective.

That willingness to receive also models God’s love. God gives lavishly to us, something that should be immediately obvious to anyone spending fall in New England. But God also loves receiving. You know how thrilled you are when a gift you give is received with joy and gratitude? That’s a response we have because we are made in God’s image. God also is thrilled by those things; that’s where we get it from.

The Bible is full of God relishing the adoration and gifts of the people. That’s not vanity; that’s a God who loves with abandon and whose heart is warmed—as ours are—by having that love returned and expressed. But also remember that the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—is not primarily about individual behavior.

The purpose of having individuals constantly checking our behavior against the teachings of the Bible—and for Christians, the teachings of Jesus specifically—is so that the grand vision of the Beloved Community, as expressed by both the prophets of the peaceable kingdom and the vision of the healing of the nations in the book of Revelation, might come to fruition. And on that front, we have a very long way to go.

All we need to know about how far we are as a society from the kingdom of God coming “on earth as it is in heaven,” is the simple knowledge that, in the United States of America, in the year of our Lord 2025, children have “lunch debt.” If that were not shameful enough, there are laws in many states and communities where generous individuals are not allowed to pay that off for someone else.

One of the most absurd rules was highlighted in a New Hampshire news article this past week, where a person wanted to pay off the lunch debt of students in their local school. But, claiming that it would be unfair to pay some families more than others, the only gift that would be accepted was paying 100% of the lowest debt and giving that amount, and no more, to every family.

The lowest amount of debt at the school? \$1. So, even though a person was quite willing to pay off the debt of \$100 for one family and \$30 for another, the school refused those gifts and everyone who owed money got \$1 taken off their debt.

Massachusetts has a law that provides free school meals for all children; and, to my knowledge, there is therefore no “lunch-debt” in our public schools. Our Church Council voted a couple of years ago to sign our name to a petition to get that law passed, and it was renewed again for this year.

But if you sit back and wonder how we got to the place of cruelty, corruption, and violence where we now find ourselves; just rewind the tape to see when it was that we first thought children had to somehow deserve food and pay for the privilege of living.

And if you wonder, as we all do, what can possibly be done to reverse the damage; I think the answer begins with modeling, in all things, the cycles of giving and receiving, from a spirit of love and without regard to merit. In short, to bring God's grace to every encounter, great and small.

"Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far; and grace will lead me home.

Jacob's story doesn't end here. He still has more to learn about God and grace and himself. To go all the way will take having his heart ripped away by the feuds between his sons, some of whom deceive him as he once deceived Isaac because, like Isaac and Rebekah before him, he played favorites with his kids.

And then in Jacob's old age being forced, with the whole family, to become refugees in Egypt when famine drove them to the brink of starvation. He would be forced into humility yet again; forced to cross another river where he couldn't go back and with danger ahead, only this time it was the Nile. And yet again finding God's grace and a lost son to welcome him on the other side.

Jacob is a complicated character, and his story takes up fully half of the book of Genesis—25 of its 50 chapters. And it's from this flawed, complex character and his equally complex sons that God calls forth the nation of Israel. I don't find it surprising that when Jesus thought about how he might teach his followers about the nature of God's grace, he told a story that began, "There once was a man who had two sons." Indeed. Indeed. Amen.