

Kingdom Identity, Kingdom Walk  
A Sermon for August 6, 2017  
Genesis 33:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21  
Lansdowne UMC

The disciples are ready to send the crowds away. Presumably they don't want the hungry crowd to turn into a hungry mob. But Jesus quite casually suggests that the disciples don't need to send them away. "You give them something to eat," Jesus says.

The disciples don't have much to give. They're pitifully prepared. All they have to offer is five loaves of bread and two fish. One of the amazing things to me about this miracle is that Jesus uses the meager offering of the disciples and multiplies it 1000-fold. In the hands of Jesus, a sacrificial offering that might have left the disciples hungry ends up yielding more food than the whole crowd can eat. There were 12 baskets of food left over.

It would seem that this miracle, in a way, was only possible when the disciples offered all that they had, depending on Jesus for the result. But this way of trust, dependence, and sacrificial offering wasn't just the means by which Jesus brought about this *one* miracle. This is a fundamental natural law of the kingdom of God. The self-sufficient may not enter. That's not a random rule, but it's bound up with what it means for God to be in charge. Kingdom life is a life of radical dependence on God. Jesus says "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

You know, Jesus said that it would be very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom. [Perhaps many of us wish it were a little harder for us to enter the kingdom, if you know what I mean.] I really don't think that's because Jesus has something against rich people, *per se*, but because Jesus knew that rich people would have greater trouble submitting all of themselves to God and God's purposes. People who are rich can easily get stuck in their tendency to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. Generally speaking, because the rich have the means to get what they want, they don't recognize their need for God with the same sense of urgency that the poor do (again, generally speaking). And so I think that Jesus warned his followers that it would be difficult for such self-sufficient people to enter the kingdom of God.

Jacob, the main character in our Old Testament reading, was this type of self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-made man. And it's his story that I'd like to focus on today. Whatever opportunity Jacob saw, he'd grab it. He was actually like this even before he was born! In Genesis 25 we learn we learn that he was fighting with his twin brother Esau while they were still in the womb. Esau comes out first, but Jacob came out grabbing Esau's heel. His name, Jacob, is a play on words. It means, literally, heel-grabber. In other words, Jacob is a deceiver. He's someone that attacks you from behind. Hits you where you're vulnerable and aren't watching out.

There's this time when Esau comes in from the field and he's huuungry. He asks Jacob for some food. You'd think that Jacob would be like, "hey bro, I know you're tired from being out on the hunt. Here's some stew that I made." Esau would say, "thanks bro, you're a life-saver." And then Jacob would say, "no problem. That's what family's for!"

Yeah that's not what happened at all. This is more how the conversation actually goes. "Hey Jacob, let me have some of your food." "Suuuuure, no problem. That'll just cost you... let me tally it up.... That'll be, your whole portion of the inheritance" "Well, What use is an inheritance if I die of hunger. Just give me the food." And so Esau swore away his birthright for a bowl of soup.

Sure, Esau wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but his brother was just such a schemer. To make matters worse, Jacob grew up in a messed up family. Can you imagine being named "Deceiver," which is basically Jacob's name. After a childhood of being called by that name, don't you think that maybe you start to believe it.

Well, having gotten rich on his first hit of the gateway drug of manipulation, Jacob moves on to outright deception, living up to his name. When their father Isaac had gotten old and was going blind, he asked Esau to go hunting for him so that he could make him some of the tasty game that he loved to eat. Isaac says that when Esau does this, he'll give Esau his blessing. Rebekah, Jacob and Esau's mom overhears this and plots for Jacob to deceive Isaac into giving him the blessing instead of Esau. Like I said, this is a pretty messed up family. So Rebekah cooks up some goats to pass off as Esau's game and she takes takes the hairy goat skins and puts them on Jacob, Mr. smooth, so that he'll pass for his rough and hairy brother. She even puts Esau's clothes on him so that he'll smell like Esau.

So Jacob goes to Isaac as Esau, and Isaac says, "how'd you get back so quickly?" And Jacob says, "The Lord *your* God led me right to it." The

Lord is just Jacob's father's God. The Lord is not the God of Jacob, but only one more tool in Jacob's toolbox of manipulation and deception.

The deception works, and Jacob receives Isaac's blessing:

Be lord over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be everyone who curses you,  
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

Well, Esau came back to find that his brother had grabbed his heel again, so to speak. Isaac said, "Your brother has already come *deceitfully* and has taken your blessing." He says, "Isn't this why he's called Jacob? He's taken me twice now: he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing." Esau was livid, and he planned to kill Jacob.

So Jacob decides it's time to get out of Dodge. His mom tells him to go up to uncle Laban who lives about 450 miles away in Haran to try to marry a nice girl. It's on the journey to the family up north when Jacob first encounters God for himself. Sure he'd heard about the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, but at Bethel, Jacob has his own encounter. We read this story a few weeks ago. Jacob has a dream where he sees angels ascending and descending on a ladder. There God promises him to I will give you him and his descendants the land he was on, the land of Canaan. He says he'll have many descendants and that all of the families of the earth will be blessed because of him and his family. Finally, God says that he'll protect Jacob wherever he goes and bring him back to the land.

And so Jacob makes a promise. It sounds more like a bargain. We do that with God from time to time, don't we? He says, "If God is with me and protects me on this trip I'm taking, and gives me bread to eat and

clothes to wear, and I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God." (Gen 28:20–21)

Eventually Jacob gets to his destination and finds the girl he's looking for. At first it seems like Jacob has met his match in manipulation and deception. Laban tricks Jacob into marrying both of his daughters and cheats him out of his wages. But Jacob manages to trick Laban. It says he grows "exceedingly rich, and had large flocks...." (30:43).

God speaks with him again and says "...get up and leave this country and go back to the land of your relatives.' " (Gen 31:33). And so Jacob deceives him one last time by up and leaving while he's busy during the sheep-shearing season.

So after 20 years, Jacob finally gets away from Laban. But Jacob knows that there is likely to be trouble ahead, because the closer he gets to the promised land, the closer he is to running into Esau. Of course the last time he saw Esau, Esau was ready to kill him. And so he sends messengers to Esau, to tell him, more or less, "Hey, it's not looking like I'm going to need all that inheritance after all. Do you think that you might be nice?"

Jacob continues south toward Esau's land until he reaches the Jabbok river, the border to the promised land. The messengers come back and say that Esau's coming... and he's got 400 men with him. It says Jacob was "greatly afraid and distressed." It seems obvious that Esau is still out to kill him.

Jacob's been in tight spots before. He's Jacob, after all. So he divides his company up into two camps thinking that at least if Esau attacks one in the night the other can run away. But Jacob's best isn't really giving him confidence. And so Jacob does something that he's never done before. He prays. He says, "O God of my father Abraham

and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ *I am not worthy* of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.” Jacob, the deceiver, recognizes that he’s not worthy of God’s love, and that God has kept him safe and prospered him despite his deceptive nature.

He continues on, “*Deliver me, please*, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.” Save me God! I don’t have an out! I need you to rescue me! Not only has Jacob recognized his need for God, but he’s not just out to save his own skin anymore. He’s worried about those who are with him as well. To be sure this is a turning point.

But Jacob is still Jacob. He’s not just a schemer now-- he’s a *rich* schemer. Maybe he can pay Esau off. He takes several hundred livestock and sends his servants ahead of him toward Esau to them to him as a present. He sends two or three more groups of people and animals, each with orders to tell Esau that they’re a gift from “your servant Jacob.”

Night falls, and Jacob is too worried to sleep, it would seem. How can he avert this disaster with Esau coming after him? Perhaps at the very least, he can separate himself from his family to try to keep them safe if Esau comes to kill him in the night. And so it says, beginning in verse 22: “The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.”

And it says, “Jacob was left alone.” Then in the darkness someone attacks him. Who is it? Is it Esau trying to kill him? Is it a robber? The battle is long-- it lasts all night. Verse 25, When the man saw that he did

not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him." Wow. Who is this person? He almost seems to be... supernatural.

With his hip out of joint, Jacob can't fight anymore. But he can hold on. His opponent speaks and says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob seems to know who his opponent is now, and he says, "I won't let you go unless you bless me." So the man asks him, "What is your name?" It's a simple enough question, but for Jacob it's an embarrassing question. He's the heel-grabber. The deceiver. That's who he's always been. "Jacob," he says. And so his opponent changes his name to Israel, saying, "for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

He's striven with humans his whole life. With Esau in the womb and as he stole his birthright. With Isaac as he deceived him into blessing him. With Laban, who he tricked to become rich. But here at the entrance to the promised land, "Jacob has striven with God himself and, amazingly, he has prevailed." He has a new name.

Jacob the deceiver couldn't enter the promised land. Jacob strived for the blessing of humans. But Israel strives for the blessing of God. Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." Maybe he wanted to make sure he wasn't wrong about his opponent. But the person says, "Why is it that you ask my name?" and it says, "And there he blessed him." So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Jacob had a profound personal encounter with God. And amazingly, he didn't come away with God's condemnation, but with God's blessing. Deceitful, self-sufficient Jacob was going to be used by God. But not as he was. He had to be given a new name.

And then my favorite little detail of the story. It says, “The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.” Jacob doesn’t just have a new name. He has a new walk. Every step of his life, Jacob will be reminded that it’s only by God’s mercy that his life was preserved. He’s no longer self-sufficient Jacob. And therefore it’s only by God’s mercy that he was able to enter the promised land. Everything else Jacob had, he could fool himself into thinking he’d earned it himself. But not the Promised Land. That was a pure gift from God, who changed him into Israel.

Having faced God, facing Esau isn’t so daunting anymore. After all, the God who spared him and even blessed him went with him. It says in the next chapter that “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” God moved in Esau’s heart as well to enable the brothers to reconcile.

Then in the Promised Land, Israel builds an altar to God and calls the altar El-Elohe-Israel, which means, “God, the God of Israel.” The Lord is no longer simply the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, but also the God of Jacob, the God of Israel.

The story becomes a parable for the people of Israel. When they would find themselves in slavery in Egypt and then in exile in Babylon, it would only be by God’s mercy that they would enter the land.

But how do we receive this grace so that we may enter into the kingdom of God? Yes, we must encounter God. But we must have more than an encounter. Jacob had several encounters with God-- amazing encounters, really. He dreamed and God spoke to him. Somehow he still didn’t really believe. He’d received direct instruction from God on what to do in his life. But it didn’t change him. He literally had angels meet him along his journey. But the Lord still wasn’t his God. God was just another tool in the toolbox. Use it when necessary and ignore it the rest



of the time. No, mere encounters are never enough. We must let God break us of our self-sufficiency. We need to let ourselves be broken by God, just like God broke Jacob's walk. We must submit ourselves to Jesus as our Lord. We must reach the point when we say, "I'm done trying to do it my way, Jesus. Let's do it your way."

And when we do that, God gives us a new identity-- a new birth. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. God gives us a new walk. It's a more humble walk. It's a walk of thankfulness at God's mercy. It's a walk that depends on the God who can take our meager efforts, our mixed motives, and all our frailties, and transform them into blessing for others. It's a walk of humbling submitting our bread to Jesus, knowing that with it, he can work miracles.