

Sermon 103016 Conscience
Scripture- Genesis 32: 22-31
Sermon Title- Tug of Goodness

It came out in the Tuesday afternoon Bible study that I preach almost exclusively from the gospels. It is true that my preaching is definitely Christ centered. The truth is that there are many wonderful passages in Scripture from which we can learn. Today, we look at a story from the Book of Genesis that is definitely worth looking at.

Our story about Jacob in this morning's reading from Genesis is possibly the most intriguing story about possibly the most intriguing person in the Hebrew Bible. We know more about Jacob than we do about virtually any Bible character, including Jesus in the New Testament. We read in Genesis about Jacob wrestling before birth with his twin brother Esau in the womb. We are with him at his birth. We see him in action as a child, a young man, a mature husband and father, an old man contemplating death, and we are with him when he dies. We see him interact with his parents, his brother, his two wives and their concubines, his father-in-law, his children, and his grandchildren. We are with him most every step of his very dynamic life.

Jacob and his twin Esau are opposites in many ways, almost as if each were half of a complete person, as if in the womb each had grabbed half of the traits and left the other half to his twin.

Jacob, was born holding onto his brother's heel grew up and became a trickster, a deceiver. Esau was his father's favorite, a strong, physical hunter, and a man of few words, what we might call a 'stand up kind of guy'. Jacob was his mother's favorite, more thoughtful, articulate, physically soft with a 'what's in it for me' sort of attitude.

In one encounter that teaches us much about the character of the two brothers, Esau comes home from an unsuccessful hunt, and finds Jacob cooking lentil stew. Desperately hungry, Esau asks his brother for some stew. Jacob demands the birthright (which in the tradition of the time went to the first born who was Esau) in exchange for the food. The one who holds the birthright will receive the inheritance of the family line and the inheritance of the father's possessions. Esau doesn't think the birthright will do him any good if he dies of hunger so he agrees. That brief story shows Esau as a man ruled by his appetites, who lives in the moment with little concern for tomorrow. We also see Jacob's scheming side, a young man who will try to get by cleverness what he cannot get by birth or strength.

As the story continues, the twin's father Isaac has become old and blind. He believes he doesn't have much longer to live and is prepared to bestow the patriarchal blessing upon his favorite son and first born, Esau. Rebecca, his wife, sees her favorite, the

clever Jacob as more qualified. She devises an elaborate scheme to make sure Jacob receives the blessing. She dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, covers his hairless arms with goatskins so that he will feel and smell like Esau, and sends him into the blind father to receive the blessing before Esau returns from the field. Jacob, who is uncomfortable with the ruse more out of fear of getting caught than out of a sense that it is wrong, carries it out. He tricks his father into blessing him. The ruse lasts only a few minutes. Esau comes home and exposes the sham but it is too late. The blessing, which officially confers the birthright, once given cannot be withdrawn. Furious, Esau threatens to kill Jacob. Jacob takes his mother's advice and prudently flees to the home of his maternal uncle, Laban, in another country. A lot more happens to Jacob, including gaining two wives and large flocks of prize livestock. Through it all, we don't find a lot about Jacob that is very likeable.

There is one more brief story I want to touch on before we get to the wrestling match that we heard read this morning. Jacob falls asleep in the desert and dreams of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. At the top of the ladder, he doesn't see but senses God, who assures him that his life will turn out well, that someday he will return home safely, and he will be a person who does great things. I think we can view the story of Jacob's ladder as Jacob's first real sense of the God of his grandfather Abraham and his

father Isaac. This is Jacob's experience of the one and true God, the God of creation. I think we can look at the ladder as the distance from the person that Jacob is to the person he hopes to become. It is his first encounter with God when Jacob starts to see the way to becoming a more complete person- not through deceit and misrepresentation but through sacrifice and growth. Jacob awakes from the ladder dream and the first thing he does is pray to God.

Okay, lets attend the famous wrestling match. Jacob was alone. The night was totally dark and he was afraid. Suddenly someone seized him from behind and threw him on the ground. Jacob fought back. They wrestled through the night, with no advantaged gained by either. Who is this mysterious being? Why does he attack Jacob and why do they fight to a stand off? The story is most often thought of as Jacob wrestling with an angel of God. Some commentators see it as one of Jacobs's resentful enemies that he's tricked. Some call it Esau's guardian angel.

I see this story differently. I see the mysterious attacker as part of Jacob himself. Remember, according to the Bible, Jacob is alone in the story. The attacker is exactly as strong as Jacob, no stronger, no weaker. The attacker, the angel, is Jacob's conscience, the part of him that summons him to rise above his bad impulses. The struggle is between the part of him that wins by

cleverness and fraud, and the part of him that feels summoned by God to climb a ladder to heaven, to become someone exemplary.

Jacob is at war with himself. Part of him takes pride in his ability to use his cleverness to fool people to get what he wants. But another part of him is uncomfortable with all that cleverness and the realization that people resent and mistrust him for it. Jacob, since the ladder dream, has sensed God's call to become someone exemplary. In the text, the angel of God wrenched Jacob's hip. I see it as God giving Jacob a tug of goodness. For the rest of his life, Jacob has a visible limp from the wrestling match and his name is changed to Israel. He becomes the father of the people of Israel and a good man for the rest of his life. He is still human and still flawed, but God is now in his life.

I think many of us can identify with Jacob's struggle in this story by the river. There are times when we feel that split inside us, part of us wanting to take the easy way out even as another part of us insists on taking the more demanding route. Part of us wants to do the bad things, the selfish thing and part of us wants to do the good thing, the selfless thing. Jacob was a trickster. You might not be, but I'll bet there are darker parts of your makeup that you are not proud of. You might have wanted to play the part of the Good Samaritan by stopping to help someone in need when a voice in your head convinces you not to get involved. You might have a

history of involvement in destructive behavior and/or addiction and all too often choose that darkness over the light. You might be too quick to argue. You might be afraid to stand up for yourself. You might dwell in the dark side of your nature. You might be adept at not listening to your conscience. How easy it is, with practice to ignore the voice of conscience. The Talmud says that at first a bad habit enters our lives as an invited guest, then becomes a member of the family, and ends up taking over the house. We come to feel that we have lost a precious part of who we are and who we want to be.

That for us, like it was for Jacob, is where God comes in. We, over a lifetime can build defenses against that still, whispered word of God that is our conscience. Any one of us that struggles with conscience is in for a real battle. We know the difference between what we want to do and what we should do. If we are open to the presence of God in the struggle, the answer becomes clear. Our own desire to get what we want comes in conflict with the growing need to think of yourself as a good person.

Sometimes the selfish voice wins. But when we defeat the still, small voice of God inside us, we lose. But the voice, our conscience, will not be stilled forever. God help the person who does succeed in permanently stilling the voice of his conscience. God's voice will find you at a time when, like Jacob, you are

vulnerable. It will attack at a weak moment. When the struggle is over, you might be bruised and limping like Jacob-Israel. But like him, you will be whole; you will be at peace with yourself, in a way that you never were before. To be a person of conscience is to walk with God, even if you limp. AMEN