

## PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE -- JACOB

(07/21/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 25-33 (Reading from the Children's Bible)

*“And [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” (Gen. 28:12)*

This summer, in our Pony Express ministry at Pilgrim Church and First Community Church, Charley and I are taking a look at several interesting people in the Bible. We may think that the Bible is about God, and it is. But I think we could also make a case that the Bible is about people, about people's experiences of God.

Some of these people are real people, important people in the history of our Judeo-Christian tradition. Some are more mythological or symbolic, “people” whose life stories teach us something about God, about ourselves, and about life. The people who appear in Jesus' parables fall into this latter category, as do some of the people and events of the Old Testament. Jacob, the focus of our reflections this morning, seems to fall into both categories—part history and part myth.

Once again, we need to remember that all the people in the Bible are a part of us. *All the people in the Bible are a part of us.* This realization can be both encouraging and humbling.

The Bible is a collection of people's experiences of God within a specific historic and cultural tradition. It is more of a spiritual teaching, a spiritual path, than a moral code. The Bible does not present us with a coherent, cohesive, systematic theology. It is more like the experience we have watching a play. When we are watching a play, we are drawn into the drama, slowly beginning to realize that the story is about us.

In the last two weeks of my cycle this summer, we will be looking at some of the “people” in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. One of them will be the elder brother; the other is a surprise. Religion, as we know, may help us understand what it means to be a good, a moral person. However, this is not the fundamental lesson of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The parable is about the spiritual path, the spiritual journey that Jesus called the Way. Spirituality is not about morality; it's about relationship! It is about our individual relationship with God and our relationship with the deepest parts of our self. In the Old Testament, we get glimpses of this perspective in the story of Jacob.

We know that religion and culture are inextricably intertwined. The sociologists are correct when they tell us that organized religion fulfills a sociological function. According to the sociology of religion, religion is the glue that holds a society together.

Palestinian culture and religion in biblical times was patriarchal and highly structured. This provided the society with a lot of stability, but it came at a cost. It wasn't great for women, and it also wasn't great for men! Whenever a society establishes stability through the disenfranchisement and repression of any minority group, that society pays a heavy price.

This is also true of us as individuals. In Jungian terms, if a man disenfranchises his anima, his feminine side, through neglect or repression, he will be the poorer for it. In fact, he will lose his soul! As the French philosopher Simone Weil once said, "A man who is proud of his intelligence is like a prisoner who is proud of his large cell."

We can understand how this dynamic played out in biblical times around the matter of inheritance. In ancient Palestine, a father passed on his land, his house, his flocks, and all his possessions to his eldest son. This was nice and neat! It helped avoid the dissection of the farm into plots of land so small they were not sustainable. It helped avoid sibling rivalry. By taking the daughters, who were only a step above slaves in their social status, out of the equation, it made it even neater. Of course, this wasn't great for the daughters!

With regard to the status of women in biblical times, in Genesis we read that Jacob had twelve sons: six from Leah, two from Leah's maid Zilpah, two from Rachel's maid Bilhah, and two from Rachel. There were probably also some daughters in the mix, but except for Dinah they aren't even mentioned. In New Testament times, when Jesus returns to his hometown, the people who knew him as a child/adolescent/young man are filled with amazement. They say,

*Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? (Mark 6:1-6)*

Note that Jesus' four brothers are mentioned by name. His sisters, however many there were, are not.

The story of Jacob presents us with the same counter-cultural message that found later expression in Jesus' teachings. Jacob and Esau are twins. Esau, who was born first, is technically the elder, the one who is destined to receive the inheritance and his father's blessing. He is designated as the one who will carry on the covenant and the teaching that was given by God to Abraham and then passed on to Abraham's son, Isaac.

The problem is that Esau isn't fit for this task! He has the same limited aptitude for spiritual greatness that his father had. There is no record that Isaac had any religious experiences or religious insight. This is understandable. If God told my father to take me to the top of Mt. Moriah and sacrifice me for no earthly reason, even if God stayed my father's hand and substituted a goat for me at the last minute, this would probably affect my relationship with that God in a negative way. To use an old expression, I would trust God about as far as I can dropkick a piano. (BTW, this is an old, not a biblical expression.)

Isaac and Esau are both "good old boys." Esau is a big, strong man. He is a hunter. He brings his father good things to eat. This is the essence of their relationship. There is nothing wrong with a good meal, as I can well attest. However, a spiritual giant's horizons should be a little broader and also a little deeper.

Rebekah, Esau and Jacob's mother, knows her firstborn is not up to the task of carrying on the covenant. Guided by God, she does something unethical by the moral standards of their culture. She helps her younger son, Jacob, deceive Isaac and cheat his brother out of Isaac's blessing. Rebekah knows that her favorite, Jacob, is the one who should carry the light of the covenant into the next generation.

Esau, by the way, goes on to marry a couple of Canaanite wives who do not respect Isaac and Rebekah. He also marries the daughter of Ishmael, the son that Abraham disinherited and drove out into the desert. So, Esau is definitely not the one to help the Israelites strengthen their unique cultural and religious identity!

Jacob, at first, seems relatively clueless! He has no ambition to be a religious or spiritual leader. He is a mother's boy; he just dutifully goes along with whatever his mother says. He takes advantage of a moment of vulnerability and persuades Esau to trade away his birthright, his inheritance, for some bread and a bowl of lentil stew. He then deceives Isaac, whose eyesight is failing, into thinking that he is Esau so that he can receive Isaac's blessing. Jacob is a liar and a cheat! However, once he gets Isaac's blessing, it's a done deal. There is nothing that Isaac can do to retract it.

Rebekah knows that Esau is planning to extract revenge on Jacob, so she tells Jacob to run away, to live with her brother Laban in Haran until Esau cools down. Jacob leaves in the middle of the night, never to see his mother again.

As you can see, this is a strange story. It violates the customs, the sacred religious traditions of the land. The younger son, who is a scoundrel, a liar and a cheat, emerges as greater than the elder. He is definitely not a good son! A wife, who is supposed to be

loyal and subservient to her husband, lies to him and helps her younger son deceive him. She is definitely not a good wife! She also plays favorites, which a mother is not supposed to do. But God uses her ability to access and integrate her shadow in the service of a higher good.

You know the saying: What goes around comes around! When Jacob arrives in Haran, he falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. However, custom dictates that Rachel's elder sister Leah should be the one to marry first. So, Laban makes a deal with Jacob. If Jacob works for Laban for seven years and helps to make Laban prosperous, Laban will let him marry his daughter Rachel.

Jacob works the seven years, and Laban prospers. On the night of his wedding, however, Jacob must have had too much to drink. Laban takes advantage of the situation by sending his older daughter, Leah, not Rachel, into the wedding tent. When Jacob wakes up in the morning, having consummated his marriage, he discovers that the woman lying next to him is not the woman that he thought he was marrying!

I will refrain from commenting on the problems attendant to a lack of attention to detail, e.g., when you are so drunk that you don't know the person whom you are taking to bed, when you really don't know the person you are marrying. The point is that Jacob, the trickster, has been tricked! He now has to work another seven years for the right to marry Rachel. As we know, karma, when it comes around, can be an unpleasant experience!

On the way to Haran, Jacob has the first of his two religious experiences. He receives a dream of a ladder that connects earth and heaven. Angels both ascend and descend this ladder. The Lord appears to Jacob in the dream and tells him that the promise that was given to Abraham is now given to him. This dream, the dream of Jacob's ladder, is at the heart of the spiritual way. It tells us that God reaches out to us, but also that we can reach out to God. Earth and heaven, the secular and the sacred are truly connected! As Christians we believe that the most powerful expression of this connection is in the person and the teaching of Jesus.

On the way back home from Haran, Jacob has his second religious experience. He wrestles all night with the angel of God by the ford of the Jabbok River, and he actually holds his own. He manages to extract a blessing from the angel, who tells him that his name will no longer be Jacob; it will be Israel. Jacob goes on to be reconciled with Esau, who has somehow managed to forgive his lying, cheating brother. Jacob's twelve sons go on to establish the twelve tribes of Israel, foreshadowing the twelve

disciples of Jesus. Joseph, the next to the youngest and one of Jacob's two sons from Rachel, goes on to become a dream interpreter and saves his people from famine.

So, what is the moral of this story? I think this story teaches us that religion, at least our religion, is about more than an orthodox belief system or even a commitment to leading a good and moral life; it is about our relationship with God. Second, in the terms of Jungian psychology, it teaches us that there are times when we need to integrate our shadow in the service of individuation. The younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is another example of this. Third, the story of Jacob gives us two powerful metaphors for our spiritual journey. The first is the matter of wrestling, of doing battle with God. This is an experience that many of us have had in relation to life or parts of life that we would like God to change. The second is that there is something that connects heaven and earth, and this something is inside us!

The story, the myth of Jacob teaches us that God's purpose, God's ways are greater and more mysterious than we can fathom! Our religion is not reducible to our societal or cultural mores. To be sure, we need to listen to and take seriously the moral code, what Freud called the superego and Jung called the collective consciousness of our society. But we also need to listen to that still, small voice within, the voice of God that speaks to us as an individual. At times God might even lead us to break our own as well as our society's moral code in the service of individuation, in our journey toward the wholeness and uniqueness as a child of God that God wants us to be.

In the last analysis, Jacob teaches us that the Christian Way, the Christian spiritual path, is not reducible to any simple formula. This is also the message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. If the Christian Way were simply about living a good, a moral life, it would not be about a complex, mysterious, and continually unfolding relationship, which it is!

And it also would not require faith!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.