

“Unlikely Heirs”

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Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:18-25

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An opportunist and a liar. Those are the words that come to mind for me whenever I hear or read the stories about Jacob in Genesis. Jacob is a scoundrel; he is craven. First he swindles his brother Esau out of his claim to the birthright of the firstborn, then he lies to their father, masquerading as Esau, to squeeze Isaac's blessing from him, a blessing that would ensure Jacob received everything of value that was Esau's by right. And we find him now in the process of running away to escape Esau's wrath. So we can add coward to the list of attributes for Jacob.

Jacob is not your typical hero. There is nothing in him to inspire or impress us. No nobility, no honesty, no bravery. Yet somehow he stumbles upon this place, this house of God. In Celtic spirituality there is a belief in “thin places,” those locations where the barrier between the material and spiritual worlds is especially thin and easy to penetrate. Jacob found himself in such a place and had a vision of a movement of angels between heaven and earth. But more than that he had an encounter with the very God who commissions that movement, the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac.

And suddenly, just like that, this story is no longer about Jacob. This is a story about God. Jacob discovers in that place something crucial about the One he's dealing with. The God of Abraham and Isaac is not interested in our earning favor. This God is free to dispense favor on whomever God chooses. This God is a God of grace. Now that's an amazing thing to discover in a world that demands scores be settled, in a world where a person's condition is seen as their own doing and so despises poverty and those who live in it, in a world that has no place for grace.

By choosing Jacob God rejects all our cherished notions of what must be done to merit our place in God's sight. Do you notice how utterly unconditional God's promise is to Jacob? There's no deal here. God doesn't give Jacob any instructions about where to go or how to live his life. God merely chooses him: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go....”

Grace is what inclines God toward us. Grace alone compels God to choose us, to draw near us, to embrace us. That can be a hard truth to swallow at times. All around us is the mythology of merit: the claim that we must earn our way in the world and whatever we have, or don't have, we deserve. Yet try as hard as we might we can never measure up. There will always be a part of us that knows better, a part of us that knows what a sham our lives are. Because we know who we are. We know what we've done to hurt or embarrass or betray. We know when we see those who go hungry or those who are homeless that we're no better than they are, we don't deserve our circumstances anymore than they deserve theirs.

Without grace we're nothing. Without grace we're stuck in this morass of self-delusion and self-loathing. Without grace all we can do is groan within our spirits, waiting desperately for a way out. Paul understood that. Paul, a man who by all appearances had earned his way into God's favor. How does he describe himself in Philippians: "A member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Yet he could not ignore the groaning of his spirit, the longing for redemption; a redemption he could not earn.

He, like Jacob, stumbled upon his redemption. He backed into grace and became another of God's unlikely heirs. How is it that God makes such scandalous choices? Why can't all the characters in the Bible be upright and unblemished? I suppose one answer is to recognize that if that were true, then we would never see ourselves in that story. But another answer, a less self-centered one, is to recognize that God sees more in us than we see when we look in the mirror.

God sees a reflection in us, God's own image, however obscure, instilled in us. It is that image that longs to be revealed, to be redeemed. That is the glory Paul speaks of, the glory about to be revealed, the unveiling of the children of God. That image, that true identity, resides within every other we encounter. It resides there and, as John Calvin writes, "compels us to embrace them," no matter what differences or complaints or wrongs might stand between us.

But only grace can make that possible. And grace can only be expressed when we have experienced it in our own lives. We extend what we've been given. And for many of us that means letting go of our attempts to earn God's favor. It means letting go of the busyness that distracts us from the inward journey. The seventh century monk, known as Isaac the Syrian, wrote: "Be at peace with your own soul; then heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you, and so you will see the things that are in heaven; for there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the kingdom is hidden within your soul. Flee from sin, dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend." Perhaps what Jacob saw in his vision was not at Bethel, but within his own soul. And so we all may need to climb Jacob's ladder and discover God's grace.

And in case you fear that this kind of journey might detract from what we do on behalf of others, I assure you that will not happen. In fact, quite the opposite. When we discover God's grace in our own lives and recognize God's image within ourselves, we cannot help but become more achingly aware of that image within others. And just as God embraces us in Christ by entering our condition, so we will be moved to embrace those whose spirits are groaning and enter their condition to reveal the grace we have received. And thus God's children will be revealed, heir after unlikely heir, even the likes of you and me.

Amen