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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 24, Series C
Saturday, October 19th, 2019
Sunday, October 20th, 2019

Sermon: The God of the Cheater (Jacob)¹

Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Focus: God gives us grace rather than what we deserve.

Function: That they would trust in God's grace even in hard times.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "...We are neither worthy of the things for which we have prayed, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace..." (SC, 5th Petition of Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In Psalm 46, the powerful poem that inspired Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," we pray, "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Ps. 46:7, ESV). The God of Jacob is our fortress! These wonderful words always inspire me. But if you know anything about Jacob from the Bible, you know that he was a rather unsavory sort—a bit of a scoundrel. Jacob was not a nice guy, and his name means "heel grabber," which is a euphemism for "cheater." So when we pray Psalm 46, what we're saying is that "the God of the Cheater is our fortress." What a bizarre thing to say in blessing! Yet knowing the gracious God we have, we shouldn't be surprised.

Jacob was a trickster who lied and cheated his way through life, getting a choke hold on whatever he wanted and not letting go until he had it. He earned the name Cheater the day he was born. As a younger twin, Jacob tried to come into the world first by pulling his twin, Esau, back into the womb, tugging on his heel. So he was called Jacob the "heel snatcher," or cheater.

Frederick Buechner describes Jacob's character like this: "Jacob was never satisfied. He wanted the moon, and if he'd ever managed to bilk Heaven out of that, he would have been the next morning for the stars that go with it."²

Jacob certainly lived up to his name when he bamboozled his meathead brother out of his birthright for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29-34). Then, at his father's deathbed, Jacob stole Esau's blessing. Esau was a hairy man who enjoyed hunting, but Jacob was more effeminate with smooth skin and enjoyed hanging on his mother's apron strings in the kitchen. So he disguised himself in goatskins, pretending that he was his older brother so that Isaac, blind and half-senile, couldn't tell the difference.

"Who are you, my son?" Isaac asked.

Jacob lied through his teeth: "I am Esau your firstborn."

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on March 28th, 2012, at Christ Lutheran Church, in Denver, Colorado, as part of a Lenten midweek pulpit rotation.

² Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), 64.

Jacob wasn't convinced at first. So he groped blindly at Jacob's arms, feeling the goatskins for reassurance. "The voice is Jacob's," he said, "but the hands are the hands of Esau" (Gen. 27:22). Yet Isaac kissed him and gave Jacob a blessing, prophesying that he would be lord over all his brothers (27:26ff).

When Esau found out, he begged his father to bless him too. "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father" (Gen. 27:38; cp. v. 34).

But Isaac answered, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing" (v. 35). The messianic line would come through Jacob, not Esau, and both brothers could not bear the same blessing.

Esau answered, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (v. 36). Furious, Esau fell into a murderous rage, bent on revenge and vowing to kill his twin (27:41-45). Jacob fled hundreds of miles away to his Uncle Laban's house.

Laban had two daughters: Leah and Rachel. Leah was the older, less attractive sister. The Bible says that her eyes were "weak," a euphemism suggesting that either she had poor eyesight or she wasn't much to look at. "But Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance" (Gen. 29:17). Smitten by his cousin Rachel's beauty, Jacob asked Uncle Laban for her hand in marriage.

But Laban told Jacob that he had to earn his bride, and he convinced Jacob to work for him seven years in order to pay the bride price for the girl of his dreams. But Laban was a bit of a conman himself, and seven years later, on Jacob's wedding night, after the groom got drunk, he switched brides on him! Jacob knew he was played when he woke up the next morning next to the older, ugly girl, Leah. The cheater had been had! Laban pulled a fast one on the heel grabber. So Jacob had to work another seven years to marry Rachel, the woman he really loved.

One ill turn deserves another (or so we say!). Jacob lived by the motto, "Nice guys finish last," and he didn't want to be last, so he wasn't a nice go. He got back at Laban by an ingenious scheme of animal husbandry by which he bred out his uncle's solid-colored sheep and increased his own flock of speckled, spotted, and striped sheep. After Laban's sons (Jacob's other cousins) grumbled that Jacob had stolen their father's wealth (i.e., *their* inheritance!), he knew he'd outstayed his welcome. So in the middle of the night, without even saying goodbye, Jacob gathered his wives, children, servants, and property and left town in a hurry.

Even God said it was time to go: "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred," the Lord told him, "and I will be with you" (Gen. 31:3).

And so it was that on his way back to the land of Canaan, back to his bully brother's neighborhood, Jacob wrestled with the Lord in the night. As our Scripture reading begins, Jacob had just received word that Esau was marching to meet him with a band of 400 men, most likely armed (32:6). So he sent a bribe over the Jabbok River in order to appease the anger of Esau. Undeserving though he was, he prayed for God to save him from his brother's wrath and spare his family's lives (32:9-12). Then he sent his wives and kids across river, hoping his brother wasn't such a brute as to murder innocent women and children.

Then on the longest night of his life, "Jacob was left alone..." (Gen 32:24). Fearing death and the massacre of his family, the old cheater knew his game was up. The moment of truth had come. Left alone with his anxious thoughts and seemingly unanswered prayers, he wondered what the night would bring. Would God change his brother's heart and spare him, or would he and his family be dead before morning?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a “man” came out of the dark to wrestle with Jacob. He didn’t come to kill him or beg from him or encourage him. He came to *wrestle*! Jacob and the stranger struggled on through the night, and when the mystery man—who was really no man at all—saw he wasn’t winning, he threw Jacob’s hip out of joint.

I don’t know the rules of wrestling in the ancient Near East, so I cannot be certain, but it seems to me as though the stranger *cheated* when he dislocated Jacob’s hip socket. He made an illegal move in order to subdue his opponent. But still Jacob fought on!

“Let me go,” said the man who was more than a man.

But Jacob wouldn’t let go. The “heel grabber” held on, insisting, “I will not let you go *unless you bless me*” (32:26).

Suddenly, the stranger stopped mid-throw and calmly asked, “What’s your name?”

“Jacob” (translation: Cheater).

“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” No longer is your name Cheater, but rather He-who-wrestles-with-God.

Jacob asked the man’s name, but he wouldn’t tell him—“Why do you ask my name?” But before the man disappeared back into the night, he blessed Jacob. Then Jacob knew who he was dealing with—it was the Lord! “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel,” which means Face of God, and he said, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered” (32:30).

Jacob feared battle with his brother but wrestled with God instead. And though Jacob limped away from that encounter with God, he went away a winner—not because he lied, not because he cheated, and not because he was a better athlete. Jacob won because *God blessed him*. God gave him what he didn’t deserve but needed so desperately. “Luckily for Jacob,” Buechner writes, “God doesn’t love people because of who *they* are but because of *who he is*. It’s on the house is one way of saying it and it’s by grace is another...”³

Generally, good things in life come to us in one of three ways: you either work for them, steal them, or they’re given to you. Jacob hardly worked hard a day in his life (at least not until he met Uncle Laban), and he didn’t get that grace is a free gift. So he schemed his way through life lying, cheating, and stealing. Ever the master manipulator, he took whatever he deemed his due. But when all the chips were down and Esau marched against him, Jacob turned to the God of last resort, the God of his fathers, the God he barely trusted or knew, and he prayed:

“O LORD..., I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.... Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children...” (32:9-11).

Jacob was right. He *wasn’t* worthy. (Neither are we.) The Lord probably should’ve thrown Jacob to the jackals and let his brother have at him! But that didn’t matter. God blessed him anyway. God saved him, rescued him, and even moved Esau’s heart to forgive him in one of the most amazing family reunions in history (Genesis 33)!

You see, God didn’t bless Jacob in spite of his antics. He blessed him *because* of them in order to show to the whole world that God loves and forgives dirty, rotten sinners like us. St. Paul writes in Romans 3: “No one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:12). And yet despite all

³ Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, 64-65.

that, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10).

Jacob wrestled with God and wouldn’t let go until the Lord blessed him. In his darkest hour, Jacob believed—hope against hope—that God’s mercy was greater than his own mess of things. (That’s what grace is!) And so God blessed him.

The God we worship isn’t the God of the good and upright citizen. He’s the God of the wicked and undeserving. He “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). He calls to be his disciples tax collectors and crooks, Jewish zealots (who were Israelite terrorists), conspirators to murder (like the apostle Paul), and plain, old plucky fisherman like Peter, James, and John. And he calls undeserving people like you and me.

I know we’d all like to think of ourselves as honest people. What do we have in common with people like Jacob and Laban? But if we are honest with ourselves, we are not to be trusted. Like Jacob, we are too much of the trickster. All of us are liars, cheats, and thieves. We’re hypocrites, and the miracle is that we believe any of us.

Think about all the lies we tell, big and small, in order to get ahead in life. Of course, there are little, white lies when your spouse asks you if you like their cooking or new outfit. But what about the lies we sometimes speak at the altar when we say, “I do,” but then we don’t? Or we say, “I’m sorry” to each other—or God—but don’t really mean it. We’re really only sorry that we got caught! We cheat in school and lie on our taxes. We take credit for others’ efforts at work and coast along on lazy labors. We gossip and slander our neighbors to make ourselves look better.

We put on bravado and pretend to be people we’re not. When people hurt us, we hurt them back, and we scheme like Jacob how to get even Steven with all the “Uncle Labans” in our lives. And when we’re hurting and falling apart inside, we put on a show and wear our masks to disguise our heartache and broken dreams. Like Jacob in his goatskins, we don’t let people know the real us. We don’t let people in. And if they turn their back for a second, we haul off with everything they don’t have nailed down.

But God calls your bluff. He calls a spade a spade and a sinner a sinner. He comes to you on the worst night of your life and throws everything out of joint. Yet still we struggle on, trying to believe. And it gets to the point where the pain is unbearable, but the pain of letting him go would be worse, so we cry out in the dark, “I will not let you go, Lord, unless you bless me!”

[Silence.]

“What is your name?” he asks.

And you tell him your name.

But then the Lord says, “No, that’s not your name anymore. I’m giving you a new name. I give you the name of Christ. Now you are a Christian, a little christ.”

On the darkest day of his life, Jesus was stretched out on the cross, his body twisted and torn. And he cried out! And God let him go. He let him die, so that he would never, ever let you go. And the death Jesus died is your death. And the pain he suffered is your pain. And the life he offers is your life. And in Jesus’ face you see Peniel, the face of God. Jesus wrestled with death and the devil, with heaven and hell—and with God—and won. He won! He won for you. He didn’t lie, cheat, or steal, but he forgives us for all the times we do. And he gives us what we never thought to ask for, needed all along: he blesses us! He blesses us with the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

In the end, grace is not what you'd expect—and certainly not what we deserve. Grace is what we've been trying to beg, borrow, barter, and steal for most of our lives. But it turns out to be there for the asking. When you meet God in the dark and see him face to face, when he gives you grace, you may walk away limping with everything a little bit out of joint—if you are able to stand at all. But Jesus stands. He stands by you. And he blesses you. And so we pray: “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Ps. 46:11). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.