

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Sermon Title: "Much Different Than Before" (Transformation)

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During my first round of seminary education, I took a class on the psychology of theology. The professor taught his class in such a way that he wanted us students to delve into the psychology of the characters of the Bible. He didn't want us to read the Bible and think the people were artificial figures on pieces of paper. The people of Scripture were real with real feelings and thoughts just as we have, with real sins just as we commit, with real blessings from God just as we receive.

One of our assignments was to select a person from the Bible, and analyze him or her in such a way as to understand what the person's feelings, thoughts, and attitudes were. I selected Jacob, since he was quite a colorful person.

I wish I still had the essay I wrote about Jacob, but I do remember what I said. I said he was an arrogant individual, highly-opportunistic, subtly cunning, dangerously sneaky in the way he dealt with his family, and certain not a family member we would

want to have around.

When Jacob is coming out of the womb after his twin brother Esau, he is grasping Esau's heel as a show of his subtle control over him. Despite Esau being the first born, the oracle about them in Genesis 25 says the older brother will serve the younger. The younger will be stronger.¹ From birth, Jacob the younger does everything he can to make sure this all comes true, and he uses manipulation and deception.

The first step is to take away Esau's birthright. Esau comes home from a long day of hunting, and he is famished.² He commands his brother to give him something to eat. Jacob won't feed him until Esau surrenders his birthright to him. Of course, Esau is a fool to fall for such a trap. He thinks only about his stomach and not about his future, so he gives something to his younger twin that he doesn't think will haunt him later in life. But Jacob knows his brother is in a weak position. He knows Esau thinks with his stomach and not with his brain. Jacob manipulates the situation to get what he can, because he is dangerously cunning.

The next step is to steal away his older twin's blessing. Here Jacob gets help from his mother Rebekah, who loves him more than Esau.³ Together

¹ Cf. Genesis 25:23.

² Cf. Genesis 25:29-34.

³ Cf. Genesis 25:28.

they hatch a devious plan to make food for his ailing father Isaac. They dress Jacob in goat skin with much hair on it in order to imitate Esau, who is a hairy guy. Isaac the father is blind – he can only distinguish his sons by touching them. He eats Jacob’s food, he feels the “hair” on Jacob’s body, he mistakes him for Esau, and blesses him. When the real Esau shows up, he is out of luck. His younger twin has done it to him again, manipulated the situation to steal something from him, and then leave him out to dry.⁴

This time Esau has had it. He wants to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees. He goes to live with his uncle Laban for around 14 years, during which time he marries Leah and Rachel.

One day, Jacob finally meets his match. His twin brother finally reaches him, and he wants to talk.⁵ Although Jacob is a wealthy man by this point, he doesn’t have the armed force that Esau has. Esau’s men, 400 plus, could easily overrun him, and steal away his family and servants and possessions. Esau wants to talk, and Jacob realizes that he cannot manipulate the situation for his own benefit. Jacob has got to meet him, so what can he do?

One night, Jacob is left alone near a stream of

⁴ Cf. Genesis 27.

⁵ Cf. Genesis 32:1-21.

water. He has sent all his worldly goods to the other side of the brook – wives, family, servants, livestock, everything – and now he is alone. Or, he thinks he is alone. A man approaches. Is he a real man? Is he an angel? Is the Man God himself? We aren't told specifically who this man is, but we are told in Genesis 32 that the man wrestles with Jacob. They go at each other all night, straining muscles, pulling joints to their limits, sweating profusely. Finally, Jacob gets the upper hand. He should, because he has had a life of being highly cunning and opportunistic. We have to realize right now that Jacob is about 97 years old when he wrestles this strange man all night. He still has strength enough to shift the balance of power toward himself.

The man realizes that he cannot escape Jacob's grasp – Jacob has got him in a hold that he cannot get out of. Jacob must have the upper hand. He must get what he can for himself, because he was always lived that way. Yet, he pays for his arrogance. The man merely touches Jacob's hip socket, and it ruptures. Jacob's leg goes limp. And he is lucky he has gone limp only, because if you wrestle with God, you could end up dead. Jacob is marked for the rest of his life to prove that he didn't win the fight, although he thought he had complete control. God won over him. And then, God won him over.

Jacob will not let go until he gets a blessing, just as he got one from his father years ago through deception. God says, “Your blessing is a new name. You are no longer the one who grasps, who tries to get his way, but the one who struggles and prevails. You will limp the rest of your life as a sign of this transformation. You will also meet with your brother and smooth things over amicably, no more taking advantage of him.”

Jacob makes one last ditch effort to control the man by getting his name. If you have a person’s name, you have control over him or her. The man/God simply asks, “Why do you need that?” We know why: because Jacob still tries to be who he used to be, the cunning manipulator. God would have none of it. You are Israel now – you are a transformed person. No more going back to your old life.

Sin gets a hold of us and has its way with us. Sin turns a sunny day into a cloudy day. Sin takes loving, happy relationships and twists them with an unkind word or an uncaring action. Sin feeds us with information that makes us angry, spiteful, suspicious of others. Sin turns us into gossipers or critics or backstabbers.

God never created us to be this way. God is all-perfect, all-loving, all-powerful, and with a command

God created us to reflect his image. We too should be powerful to loving and powerful to serve. But we cannot do these all the time, because sin has turned us into something selfish, something manipulative at times, something self-serving at times. We cannot even recognize what we are, because of what sin does to our attitudes and actions. We need God to transform us. We need God's hands to remold us, reform us into his image once more.

God works through us to transform us. Despite what sin does to us, God is doing all the more to rid us of sin, and thus rid us of gossip, hatred, backbiting, and general negativity.

Shirley Guthrie was a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, and he wrote a book called *Always Being Reformed*. At one point he talks about a "God-centered life." Such a life involves God being the center of who are we (obviously), but before we can get there, we must go through a time of self-examination. "Spiritual renewal begins by looking deep within our own souls and our private religious experience."⁶ We need to dig deep to see where sin has been residing. We might not want to dig that deep, because we are too scared to admit what sin has done to us. This is why we invite the Holy Spirit to

⁶ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Always Being Reformed*, 84.

investigate those places and shade God's light on them. As we said last Sunday, this is not a fun process. Sin doesn't want to let go so easily, and we don't want to admit that we are weak, incomplete people.

The move from formation (what sin has done to us) to deformation (unpacking all that bad stuff) is tricky, but necessary. Through self-examination, we admit we are sinful people who don't get many things correct. We are weak people, who need people and especially God to help us out. It is interesting that, if we looked at being a Christian like joining a club, this is the only club in which a person must admit sin in order to become a member. We must admit we are guilty of something before transformation begins. You become a politician on Capitol Hill or an executive of a Fortune 500 company, you don't admit guilt. You must act strong, act as though you have never done any wrong. You must be perfect in every way in order to join. In order to become what God wants us to become, we must be weak and imperfect, so that God may make us perfect.

Here's another thing to consider: if we are like clay, then God is the Potter. God works us like clay to mold us into what God wants us to be. With all the pushing and stretching God may do to us, we may have no clue

what we will become. But we are in the hands of the Potter, the Creator of the universe. If God knows how to create and direct stars, planets, and whole galaxies, he knows what to do in and through us tiny, little creatures. God knows how to change us so we are more loving, more caring, less selfish and manipulative.

As God moves us from deformation to transformation, we might come out of it with a limp. We bear some sort of mark from our experience with God. For Jacob it was a bruised hip that would haunt him for the rest of his life. For us, it might be a hint of a memory of something we did, and we shake our heads and ask God for forgiveness once more. Or, it might be a regret that we should have acted less stupid sooner. Frederick Buechner, a former preacher and author, said that it can be like suddenly finding an open door, and not one that was just opened, but one that has always been opened all along which you just finally came across.⁷ We should have seen it but we didn't, not until God got a hold of us.

For a Marion Jones, the once great track and field athlete from the 2000 Summer Olympics, or for a Tiger Woods, holder of 14 Major Golf Championships, it is a stigma that they have to carry around for life. Maybe

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Listen to Your Life*, January 26.

we have to carry such a stigma, to remind us that we are redeemed in Christ. It's not fun having people remind us of what we did.

Whatever it is, we might carry with us a limp of sorts, and that is a good thing. The limp reminds us that we were once really dumb and selfish, yes, but we are no longer that way today, thanks be to God. We follow the new pattern that God has molded for us, and not let the past dictate the good we can do today. The limp keep us humble – we are not so quick to think only about ourselves. The limps keeps us aware – it acts as a neon sign, pointing to the One who redeems us, and will redeem us again.

Jacob was a transformed man. As day was breaking and he was just able to move from the pain in his hip, he saw his older brother Esau coming with his four hundred men.⁸ Jacob couldn't run, but then he didn't devise a plan to manipulate Esau once more. He bowed to Esau seven times before he came close. Esau ran to his nemesis, and embraced him, and kissed him. Esau wanted to know who stood next to Jacob, and he replied, "The children whom God has graciously given *your servant*." *Your servant*. Not your enemy. Not your conniving, plotting brother. *Your servant*. Humility. Courtesy.

⁸ Genesis 33:1-17.

Jacob doesn't look to take anything from Esau – he hopes to give him many gifts out of love, out of admission of guilt perhaps. Esau says he is rich man, so he doesn't need Jacob's gifts. Jacob insists to bless his brother. He has to bless his older twin. It could be said that Jacob is manipulating Esau once more by forcing such generosity on him, but he means to mend their relationship and start fresh.

Jacob was never the same. We are never to be the same again. The old ways are gone. The new ways lie before us. And God isn't done with us yet. There is more molding and shaping to do. God will continue to work us like clay, because we are not quite ready to be set.