

Date: July 10, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 15

SERMON: “Down-at-the-Heels” Grace

Text(s): Genesis 25:19-34

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I don't know about you, but I rarely pay attention to my heels. I suppose people who are runners are more aware of their heels, but my heels don't occupy my attention much of the time. At least not until one day two weeks ago, when Carol and I were hiking up the box canyon trail at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. About halfway through the hike, I became aware that the strap on my pair of hiking sandals was making the outside corners of my heels quite sore. Thankfully, my heels were calloused enough that I didn't get a blister, but they were pretty sore by the time we finished the hike. Carol, full of wifely sympathy, told me that I should have been paying more attention to my heels and occasionally put some special foot creme on them. (I didn't even know they made special foot creme for heels.) She gave me some of hers, and that did help, so that the next hike was more comfortable.

I thought about heels again when I read our Old Testament lesson for this morning about Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons, Esau and Jacob. When the twins were born, the story-teller tells us, Jacob came out second, and he had a firm grip on his brother Esau's heel. So they named him Jacob, which means, literally, “heel-grabber.”

It was common in the ancient world to give children names that were significant either because they described some characteristic behavior or appearance that the child already possessed, or because they described some aspect of character or achievement that the parents hoped for. To a great extent, the name was a carrier of the person's identity in a way that strikes us moderns as odd. When Juliet asked why her lover was named Romeo and said that it didn't matter because a “rose by any other name would smell as sweet, she was speaking and thinking like a modern person, not like someone

in the ancient Near East. Names were very significant. You were what your name said you were. Jacob was a “heel-grabber.” And it wasn't meant to be a compliment. It's not a very flattering name. It implies that this is a guy you don't want to let out of your sight, because if you take your eyes off him for a minute, he'll have your wallet, your place in line, and your girlfriend as well. It's the sort of name you might give one of those little dogs that doesn't come barking at you ferociously head-on, but waits quietly until you've walked past, and then comes up and nips you in the heel from behind.

It struck me, as I thought about it, that most of our associations with the word “heel” and most of the metaphors in our speech that use the term “heel” are negative ones. In fact, I couldn't think of a single metaphor or figure of speech in which the word heel is used positively, can you? We describe someone who's shabby-looking and unkempt or who has obviously seen better days, “down-at-the-heels.” Of someone who is a cheat or a swindler or just a bad character, we sometimes say, “He's a first-class heel.”

Jacob was, as we will see, a “first-class heel.” He was also the grandson of Abraham—the son of Abraham's son Isaac. The stories about him take us from his birth to his emergence as the most important patriarch of the biblical nation of Israel. His twelve sons are the legendary ancestors of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. It's natural that the story of such an illustrious ancestor should be preserved and handed down the generations. And perhaps, even Jacob's reputation as a heel has given the story a certain cachet as time has gone by. I suspect most of us could think of a few similarly shady characters, a few heels in our own family trees.

The story starts with the news that Isaac and his wife Rebekah, like Isaac's parents Abraham and Sarah before them, have not been able to produce children. The theme of childlessness is a fairly common one in the stories of the Old Testament. It seems that perhaps this theme is one that is consciously emphasized as a way of showing that God's

covenant promise to Abraham to bless him with many descendants is not a promise that will be fulfilled in the ordinary human fashion. Rather, by telling stories that show that God's covenant promise is threatened by the barrenness of the parents, the point is continually re-made that Israel's very existence as a people is due to God's faithfulness in keeping covenant, even when circumstances at the human level would appear to thwart it. In other words, the theme of childlessness and miraculous birth is more concerned with theological issues than with biological ones. The theological issue is the faithfulness or trustworthiness of God.

There is not only a threat to God's promise in Isaac and Rebekah's initial inability to have children, but a threat when Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. Even before they are born, they are struggling for dominance. Talk about sibling rivalry! It's bad enough after they're born, but does it have to start in the womb? So the question is no longer, "Will God keep his covenant with Abraham and give descendants?" but "How will this promise be kept in light of the struggle that is going on between the children of Rebekah?" What are the implications for the future? Who's going to win out? What will this struggle mean?

Rebekah's question and God's answer provide us with the clue to resolving this tension. *"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."* While this story would help to explain the rivalry between the Israelites and the Edomites, the tribal group descended from Esau, it also continues the emphasis on the reversal of human expectations by God's surprising, and sometimes scandalous grace. Ordinarily, the first-born son in ancient Israelite culture was the one favored, both personally and legally. It was the first-born who inherited the lion's share of the parents' estate, the first-born upon whom the leadership of the family descended after the

father's death. The birthright not only referred to the inheritance of the estate or the mantle of leadership; it also was considered to include the inheritance of God's blessing and providential care. This story, whatever else it means, and whatever other concerns it addresses, lets us know that God's ways are not always the ways of human society or culture or custom. God doesn't conform to human traditions; God often, in fact, reverses human expectations, shatters old patterns, creates something altogether new and unique, frequently scandalizing everyone in the process. And so it will be here.

This is not a story about heroes. There's not a single thing heroic about either son in this story. Jacob more than lives up to his name in the part of the story that we heard today. He and Esau are adult men, and their father Isaac is old and blind. Jacob, with his mother's connivance, for he is her favorite son, deceives poor old Isaac into giving him the patriarchal blessing that should go to the firstborn. Since Esau is an outdoorsman and a hunter, Jacob contrives to make himself smell and feel a bit, well, gamey. We might ask why didn't Isaac, when he discovered he'd given the blessing to the wrong son, just take it back. In the ancient world, spoken words could not be taken back. They were understood to perform what they said. So when Isaac spoke the words of blessing, Jacob *was blessed*. It was a done deed. Jacob further manipulates Esau into giving up his birthright by a kind of extortion. He knows Esau's weakness, and plays Esau like a violin. Esau is starving when he comes in from the hunt, and Jacob is there to offer him his favorite lentil stew. . . for a price, of course. Jacob knows of the old prophecy spoken to his mother when he and Esau were born, and he's determined to help it come true, *"The elder shall serve the younger."*

Actually, neither son comes off very well. Jacob is shown to be the first-class heel that he is. He shamelessly manipulates and schemes to achieve his ambitions. Esau, on the other hand,

is dismissed by the narrator almost scornfully with the words, *“Thus Esau despised his birthright.”* If Jacob is an ambitious schemer and con-artist, Esau is a fool, and a stupid fool at that. He puts his belly before his birthright. He’s more concerned about instant gratification than he is about long-term implications. There’s no attempt on the part of the narrator to get us to sympathize or like either Jacob or Esau. They are not heroic figures. They are only too fallible, too gullible, too manipulative, too irresponsible, too short-sighted, too human, in fact, very much like us.

So why did a story like this make it into the Bible? Jacob is certainly no model to hold up to children and say, “See what a great man our ancestor Jacob was.” His behavior is not what any parent would want their children to emulate. We’re not talking sterling character or tough moral fiber here. We’re talking self-centered, manipulative sleaziness. So why emphasize these very things in the story? Why not let the selective memory that comes with the passage of time gloss over all the sleazy parts and put Jacob in a better light? We do that all the time, don’t we? Someone in our family dies, and suddenly they become saints, paragons of virtue, models of perfection. It’s a natural human tendency. We paint ourselves or our loved ones in memory better than we were. So why doesn’t the storyteller do that here? Why do we get Jacob the heel instead of Jacob the hero of faith?

I rather suspect that the story-teller gave us Jacob, warts and all, so that Israel would never be able to look up its family tree and say, “Well, God obviously chose us because we are so much better than everyone else. Our ancestors were persons of superior faith and charity, so that’s why God chose us.” I suspect that because this story finds echoes again and again throughout the scriptures. In Deuteronomy where Moses is presented as making a farewell speech to Israel before his death, he says to them, *“It was not because you were more numerous than other*

peoples that the Lord chose you, for you were the fewest and least significant of all peoples. No, it was because the Lord loved you that he kept his oath to your ancestors, and redeemed you out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” And in the New Testament, when John the Baptist confronts the religious leaders, he rages at them, *“Do not presume to say that you have Abraham for your ancestor, for I tell you, God is able to raise up from these stones, children to Abraham.”*

The point of this story, as of so many other stories in the scriptures, is that God does not work out his purposes in accord with human notions about who is deserving and who is not, who is worthy and who is not, who is righteous and who is not. God’s grace, the narrator seems to be saying, is a scandalous thing. It confounds our notions about who deserves what, confounds our notions about rewards and punishments, confounds our tendency toward self-righteousness and self-justification. God keeps his promises because God is God, not because of anything we do to earn or control or manipulate God’s disposition toward us.

St. Paul gave eloquent voice to this when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, *“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise or powerful or of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish to shame the wise; God chose what is weak to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised, things that are nothing to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in his presence.”*

If there is one fundamental truth that emerges from virtually every writing in the Bible, it is that God’s decision to love us, God’s decision to redeem our planet from the mess we’ve made of it, God’s decision, in fact, to use us fallible instruments in saving the whole world comes before anything we are, and very frequently in spite of what we are. That is the scandal of grace. God is gracious even to those of us who are “down at the heels.” Whatever we

may become, we become by the unfettered and unconditioned grace of God.

When Israel read this story of its patriarch Jacob, and when we read it as one of the foundation stories of our own faith, the message we should take away from it is, “There but for the grace of God go I.” If God can be faithful to his promises despite the schemes of a heel like Jacob, or heels like you and me, then there is hope for all of us and for the whole world.

God’s grace, freely given as it is, always transforms the one to whom it is given. We will see that transforming power of grace begin to operate in Jacob’s life as we look at the rest of the story in the next few weeks. God may use a heel-grabber like Jacob, but Jacob will not be allowed to remain a first-class heel. Or as a former pastor of mine once put it, “God accepts us just as we are, but God never leaves us as we are.” God’s unconditional acceptance of us, God’s thoroughly profligate love for us, always transforms us and makes us better than we are.

Our relationship to God does not depend on our moral worthiness, our intelligence, our ancestry, our social status or our qualifications. Our relationship to God, and our usefulness to God, depends, as it always has, on God’s decision for us, God’s love for us, God’s power at work within us. From beginning to end, our salvation and the salvation of the world is by grace. Once we truly absorb that great fundamental fact of our existence, we may begin at last to live in freedom and hope.