



**“HEEL GRIPPING HOPE!” — Genesis 25:19-34**  
**Preached at National City Christian Church, Washington, D.C.**  
**July 13, 2014**  
**(A Sermon Reflecting on Scripture and the Children’s Crisis)**



There are several uniquenesses about growing up as a Preacher’s Kid, “PK” in the South. There was NEVER a time in my life when I didn’t live in a “parsonage”—home owned by the church. We ALWAYS lived within sight of a graveyard—and one house was actually between TWO of them. This made it awkward, to say the least, when our exploring dog would occasionally gather a collection of mis-matched flowers and deposit them at the pastor’s front door!

Also, being a PK could make it easy to score high on some games like Password—remember that one?—where, for example, if the word was “apple,” we could get it first round with the clue “Eve,” if the word was “flood” we could score immediately with the clue “Noah”. And you’d have thought that if the word was “ladder” we could say “Jacob’s” for the big win. Except that one night as a kid I got a little over excited, and more than a little over confident--when instead for the word “ladder” –I enthusiastically gave the clue “Joseph’s”! My brother (of course!) instantly responded “coat!”—and I realized I’d made a costly mistake for the team!!

And, as a PK, it seemed even physical injuries somehow became connected to Biblical references...like the time I fell at age three I crushed ALL my fingers in a folding cot, and on the way back from the doctor, my 4 year old brother leaned up to me in the front seat, patted my shoulder, and reassured, “Don’t worry Sharon...Jesus had NAILS in his hands!”

Yes, there were some unique influences growing up a PK. But whether or not that was your same reality, perhaps still those words and themes of Bible stories that ANY of us heard held our interest. There was much about these Bible characters that was so gritty and intriguing, that made us cling to them in all different times and ways in our lives. And perhaps NO character was any grittier than Jacob in the saga of his life—just started in our passage from Genesis 25 today.

Genesis 25 is a story—the 4<sup>th</sup> of 5 sets of GENeologies—GENERation stories in GENesis. It comes after the genealogy of creation and Adam, the flood and Noah, the lineage of Shem and Terah (that leads to Abraham)—that come up to family of Ishmael and Isaac (that leads to JACOB). In a book so much dominated by pairs...light/dark, man/woman in creation, Cain/Abel, Abraham/Lot, Isaac/Ishmael...today’s tale brings us the pair of JACOB & Esau...& arguably, another pair just as powerful, too—the pair of Jacob & his mom Rebekah.

Genesis 25 is a story with youth protagonists Esau and Jacob who are the grandsons of Abraham, the founding patriarch, in this early and very fragile stage of the nation building of Israel. It’s a story where Jacob is as cunning as a coyote in the desert...and we’re hearing the passage when our country has been staring quite uncomfortably at the consequences of the coy coyotes and druglords who cut exorbitant deals in the deserts and on doorsteps of Central American homes that provoke kids into a migrant crisis now among us. It’s a Bible story we’re hearing about children when so many have been asking what children belong in our own nation--as thousands have been fleeing like refugees to escape violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The stories of these children are horrifying—and most too graphic to even tell from the pulpit. I was told this week a story of a THREE and SIX year old from Honduras—now escaped to the US—who were raped by a drug cartel until the mother felt she HAD to send them away to survive. Others are charged \$7,000 & promised BY the cartels that they’ll arrive safely here...only to continue to be extorted all along the path of their journey, and even until the very point of entrance, when any relative in the US is demanded by the cartels

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to wire money just to keep their child, niece, or nephew alive. Our own Honduran mission worker I met at Disciples Women’s Quadrennial two weeks ago confirmed the too often reality of exactly this kind of violence that has fueled the crisis.

And so once more, we see that this Bible...this ancient text, is certainly no irrelevant or dusty book. Rather, it provides precisely the words, the stories, the CHARACTERS WE NEED for exactly today in our country...and for THESE DAYS of our lives. And how, exactly, might these relevant verses shore us up for life right now, and to face the crisis upon us? One global theologian (Clare Amos) suggests that throughout Genesis, “we see God on a voyage of discovery of learning how to be God.” God is learning how to interact with and relate to these creatures called “people” that God has made, and so we see God in Genesis doing that with mouth to mouth respiration in creation, coming as deafening rain to re-direct humanity under Noah, popping up unexpectedly with a ram for Abraham to save Isaac. And then here in Genesis 25, God is SO PRESENT to respond to the problems of various family members in this unusual birth story!

Isaac cannot generate a future, and so prays to God and his prayer is granted as Rebekah becomes pregnant. Rebekah has a problem pregnancy, and God responds to turn her womb of struggle into a womb to carry out God’s purpose to BUILD THE NATION ISRAEL. And Jacob was in the back of the blessing line, but God was present with him as he turned heel gripping hope from behind into a given over birthright!

Perhaps we can be guided, as we remember this evidence of God’s repeating responsiveness to the ENTIRE FAMILY’S SUFFERING, to have courage ourselves to dare to be voices of protection for those suffering around us now. In an interview from weeks before her death, when Maya Angelou was asked to name the most important virtue, she responded: “Courage...because without courage, we never have the strength to be able to fully live into the other virtues we may have been given, as well.” In our ministries, we as Disciples have been experimenting in these weeks about how we can be most nearly and courageously present with immigrant families and our churches suffering from separations and detentions as we continue to work for solutions through immigration reform. Important ways of being present have been hosting and praying with suffering families, educating them about their rights, and helping churches advocate for their members whose cases are in process—cases like that of one of our pastors who waited over 13 years for his wife’s immigration case to be approved. Her case finally was approved, but by then she’d died just days before.

One unique upcoming opportunity to be the presence of Christ is to participate either as a supporter, pray-er, or in civil disobedience near the White House in Washington, DC on July 31<sup>st</sup>. On that day, Dr. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, will join hundreds of others to engage in a faith action to ask for Administrative Relief to deportations in light of the lack of any legislative movement for reform. She and other leaders, church members, and immigrants will join to pray and wash the feet of immigrants—along with 100+ faith leaders from around the country—in her first civil disobedience as a demonstration of our denomination’s long term commitment to welcome the stranger and be God’s presence with the suffering. On that Thursday, JULY 31st at noon, HOW MANY OF US MIGHT PARTICIPATE TOGETHER WITH HER AND OTHERS? See me for information following the service about ways to respond, as God responded, to human needs.

I’m wondering how many of you might remember the Shoeshine Boy’s cartoon alter ego that—whenever his love interest Sweet Polly Purebred would be threatened by villains—would hit the phone booth and re-emerge in costume as “Underdog!” (He was one of the only underdogs to ever really BE a dog!!) Almost always in rhyme, he would say, “When Polly’s in trouble (or when help is needed), I am not slow, for it’s hip-hip-hip (obviously, this was long BEFORE hip HOP!) and AWAY I GO!!” and “There’s no need to fear—UNDERDOG is here!” Part of what I always appreciated about his style was that Underdog was never

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quite smooth or perfect: “Not plane, nor bird, nor even frog, it’s just little old me” he would say (and at this point he would usually crash into a wall or something, and slide down it) before coming up with his best victory stance, “UNDERDOG!”

The story of Jacob might also especially encourage us amid challenges as we see his story as a story of an underdog—a story of the powerless becoming empowered to act for God. And he can hardly help being an underdog! From the start, his mom Rebekah is also a weak figure—defined in this passage by what she DOESN’T have the ability to do...conceive...which made her very powerless in her culture! But SHE receives a word from God that her YOUNGEST and normally weakest would be served by the OLDEST! So, Jacob himself is in the position of the weak, second born.

Far too often, Jacob’s resistance to and proactive efforts to change his own weakness into opportunity leave him viewed as an underminer, acting lawlessly with aggression. He’s a rulebreaker, we could criticize. However, I wonder if it is much more faithful to God’s purpose in the text to view him more accurately as an underdog who is committed without stopping to follow God’s word through each of his actions? And so, he becomes an inspiring OVERCOMER & OVER-ACHIEVER in his faith and obedience to God! Jacob uses his God given strengths FROM THE BEGINNING to FOLLOW GOD’S INTENTION to survive and build God’s ancestry. Grabbing tight to the heel of Esau, he doesn’t let go of his commitment until he has cleverly wrangled the birthright as a gift from his older brother.

It reminds me of the concept from Martin Luther King, Jr. (often used to inspire the powerless in their work for human rights) that “Freedom does not tend to be voluntarily given by the oppressor, but must be claimed by the oppressed.” It becomes perfectly clear in the story that Esau is NOT the right one—even as the oldest!—to found the nation of Israel. Instead, it was Jacob’s actions—even as he started at the very beginning of his life—that would ENSURE THE ULTIMATE SURVIVAL of the generations of God’s family—because it was only Jacob that valued and protected the family birthright!

In Hebrew, the multiple root letters of Jacob’s name show the fullness of his journey of commitment. They include “Ah-Kev” that meant “heel,” as well “Akov” that means crooked (representing what he was in Esau’s eyes, NOT in God’s!), and another root of “Aikev” that means “struggling” (that so well summarizes the barriers he faced). Each of these realities finally comes through the journey of his life into fulfillment when Jacob is ultimately given the new name of ISRAEL” by God. In Hebrew, his new name meant “The one who struggles with God”—because God knew that—though Jacob’s life was filled with struggles—HE NEVER LOST EFFORT OR FAITH to follow God’s plan!

And so, I have to wonder now...WHO among the Central American children entering—which some are publicly calling ‘lawbreakers,’ ...WHO among those children entering—who ALL are struggling from violence and poverty...WHO among the children raped and extorted by drug cartels where the drug products are primarily demanded from my own homeland...OR WHO among the cancer victim, OR the homeless one, OR the abused spouse...just MIGHT be today’s JACOB/ISRAEL figure? Who among them has not lost faith despite their journeys? And therefore, WHO just may be here by God’s intent, and with great power to inspire our own faith? And, am I ready—or any of us—to let God’s plan come into being still today through “Jacob figures” whom we may least expect?

Finally, we’re left at the end of the story in the swirl of an empty soup bowl. For a bowl of red soup, Esau sells out God’s future generations to assuage his own hunger. We are trying, in meager and daily ways as Disciples, to respond to this crisis of the child migrants; our office has worked with our General Minister and President, Week of Compassion, Global Ministry, Disciples Women, Disciples Home Missions, and DCPW to

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develop initial statements of response for protection. Hundreds of Disciples joined 4,000 ecumenical partners across the country to sign a petition that it was my great honor to personally deliver on our behalf to Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson this past week that speaks of our commitments to uphold anti-trafficking protections, listen to asylum claims, and seek adequate legal and other funding to protect these children as fully as possible—and not risk returning any to further harm or death.

Our members are calling, saying the children are running into the arms of one retired pastor’s son who is working on the border. Folks are mobilizing to help in their own areas. By donating to Week of Compassion, we can also keep directing our response for needs in various locations—like our funding in recent weeks to purchase religious materials to use with the kids in the new Artesia, NM center. That work will continue in the coming weeks and months, and I encourage you to join us, please, in learning more and adding your names and presence in upcoming statements and actions (we’ll have information after the service.) Indeed, legislators have commented again and again, in the midst of this overwhelming crisis—how faith communities are responding with A+ welcome!

Indeed, anytime we don’t respond with welcome, it may mean we are simply eating a stew of policies and practices that meets OUR NEEDS now, but don’t protect the current and next generations of those whom God entrusts to our care in these days. A couple weeks ago, on my way driving home from the QA in Georgia, I couldn’t help but pull off the road and drive down to see the lovely St. Paul’s College campus that had been proposed as a family care site as children are reunited with potential family members and processed through asylum screenings and legal hearings.

As I drove into the struggling small town, I was aware we’d once had a now closed Disciples church there. The college campus was a faith campus now up for auction. FEMA had asked the town to lease it—which could have enhanced local income and jobs—to house the children only temporarily. But when a crowd of mostly out of towners had come in to say they would NEVER allow the children to come in, FEMA had to scrap the plans because of the resistance. As I drove up to the security booth of the deserted campus, I said nothing. But the inspiring young African American security guard with a church t-shirt on shook his head, and said to me: “I think they made the wrong decision not to accept the kids.” Then he pointed to an empty dorm and informed me “that is the one where the little girls were going to stay and get help.”

As I drove out of town, I passed the sign for an upcoming corn hole tournament at the fire department, passed the town’s brick factory, and passed the “Welcome to Lawrenceville” and “Brunswick County” signs. The signs said “The Original Home of Brunswick Stew.” The sun was setting--and so, it seemed, were opportunities. Because instead of once more using courage and hospitality to make and offer what used to be called “Whatchagot” stew (cause you put in whatever you could find to share) in that town—pushbacks against hospitality had resulted in a decision to only eat it themselves. May we do better together—and may our hearts open even wider to respond to the challenges before us with hospitality and compassion to protect the vulnerable. AMEN.

### **Additional Worship Resources**

#### **Opening Litany:**

Leader—As we come together in worship, let us remember the word of God, which instructs us to “love the stranger who dwells among you. For you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:19)

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**People: God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.**

Leader: For all those who have come fleeing oppression and persecution—black, brown, white, and yellow...

**People: God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.**

Leader: For those who have come fleeing hardship and hunger; who have come to join loved ones already here; who have come seeking freedom and opportunity...

**People: God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.**

(Adapted from Interfaith Worker Justice, “Immigration Litany,” [www.iwj.org/pdf/imm-litany.pdf](http://www.iwj.org/pdf/imm-litany.pdf).)

### **Prayer Before Communion:**

Elder: God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us. Let us remember the words of Christ, who said “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

**People: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” When we welcome the stranger, we welcome you, Christ Jesus, into our midst!**

Elder: Loving God, you call us to create hospitable communities. Help us to overcome any fear and anxiety we may have of those who come from other lands to live among us. Forgive us of our sins, especially the sin of indifference. Give us the courage and wisdom to create compassionate and just immigration policies. Grant that we may all live together in peace and love.

**All: (The Lord’s Prayer) Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name...**

(Written by Rev. Beverly Goines, Pastor, National City Christian Church.)

**Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea  
Director of Refugee & Immigration Ministries  
Disciples Home Missions  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**