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Genesis 32:22-32

Grateful for the Wounds

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Everybody has a dream. The dream is what gets you up in the morning. It is what you are chasing in life. Every important decision and move you've made was based on how close it gets you to the dream. Even if you don't know what the dream is, it still runs your life because then the dream is to find a dream. The problem is that it keeps moving. Dreams are hard to catch.

Some people appear to have lives that are naturally dream-like. That is Esau's story, Jacob's older brother. Esau stumbled into every blessing the world has to offer and took it all for granted. When we look at all his prosperity, popularity, and good looks, we know that some people are just born right. For the rest of us, life has always been a chore. That's why we understand Jacob so well. His story describes how life is for those of us who were not born lucky but are still determined to make something out of our lives. Some people have it made, while others have to make it happen, and we are in the second group. Believing that nothing is naturally coming our way, we are determined to go out and make our dreams come true.

The problem with dreams is that the only good ones come from God, and he insists on just giving them to us as blessings. Even Esau knows that the best dreams are things like having someone to love, finding purpose to your life, or a friend who will stick with you through anything. These only come into our lives as blessings, which can only be received as a grace. You cannot pry a blessing out of God's hands. But you can mess up a blessing, and the best way is to insist on getting it for yourself. That's the great flaw in Jacob's life, and perhaps ours as well.

Jacob and Esau were twins, but they were far from being identical twins. Esau was a hairy man of the field, a man's man, and his father's favorite. Jacob was a quiet, thoughtful, schemer who stayed in the tents with his mother. Their father was named Isaac, and he isn't all that significant a figure except that he was their link to the blessings of life that Jacob wanted more than life itself. The problem was that everyone else assumed these blessings would naturally fall to Esau as the firstborn.

Everyone, that is, except the twins' mother Rebekah, who remembered that God promised to give the blessing to Jacob when the boys were in her womb. Surely Rebekah told her son about this promise, and God himself repeated it to Jacob on several occasions in his life. But Jacob just couldn't believe it because everything in the world proclaimed a preference for Esau.

Like Jacob, we all have a twin. From the day we were kids, we began measuring ourselves against some Esau, some image of what we thought we should be. Esau is like you, but better. He's

the preferred image you have of yourself — smarter, better looking, more successful. He's the person you think you have to become before you can get any blessings. This means that no matter what you accomplish, it's never good enough because you're constantly evaluating yourself by this big, hairy twin that you drag behind you as a judgment.

When the boys were young, Esau was picked first when the other kids chose teams. He got the best grades and went to the best colleges. He has the best jobs, a great home, and fabulous children. Esau is *Time Magazine's* Man of the Year. So maybe your Mamma thinks you're special, but you are no Esau. And it drives you crazy. The story of Jacob's life is exactly that. It's the story of a man driven crazy to earn a blessing.

When Isaac had grown old and blind and knew his days on earth were coming to an end, he summoned Esau, his favorite son who was out in the fields. It was time to pass the blessing on as Abraham had given it to him. But Rebekah heard her husband's instructions and quickly summoned Jacob who was nearby. She dressed him up in Esau's clothes and placed goat's wool on Jacob's neck and hands so he would feel like his hairy older brother. Then she told him to go in to Isaac, pretending he was Esau.

When Jacob entered his father's tent, Isaac asked, "Who is there?" Jacob said, "I am Esau." It was a lie, of course, but only a partial lie. By this time Jacob had become so obsessed with Esau and the honor his father gave him that when he said, "I am Esau," he was almost telling the truth. But actually he was still only Jacob dressing up his life to resemble his preferred image.

We all look so good on Sunday mornings in church. And what about the clergy? We're wearing cassocks, collars, tabs, robes, and sometimes we have flags hanging off of us. Every time I put all this stuff on I can still hear an older woman who told me on the day I was ordained, "Son, if you have nothing to say, you should at least look nice." Is that all we are doing? Are we just dressing up to look like our preferred images?

Can you imagine how this scene in Isaac's tent looked from heaven? There, God sees Jacob with goat's wool taped to his neck and hands thinking, "Ai-yi-yi. This is the guy I'm blessing?" God is not blind! He has promised to bless you. Not your preferred image of yourself.

Well, as a result of all of Jacob's scheming, he has to run from the home he was striving to inherit because an angry Esau wants to kill him for stealing their father's blessing. He runs to the home of Laban, Rebekah's brother, where he tries to start over. This is every striver's favorite plan. But Jacob brought his striving heart with him, which means he has actually fled nothing. Years later, when he has to run away again, he has messed up two marriages and schemed Laban out of a fortune. The only place left to run was back home, but when Esau gets word that Jacob is returning, he gathers up four hundred men and races toward him. This terrifies Jacob who sends all of his fortune and his family ahead of him in hopes of appeasing his angry brother.

Now Jacob is alone and bankrupt again. There are no more towns to move to, no new jobs or relationships to start, and no more chances for self-improvement. Now Jacob is stuck with Jacob. This is the great problem with hustling through life. We have to keep letting go of things in

order to run to the next thing we think will make us happy. Eventually, we start to measure life not by the next achievement but by the blessings we have lost along the way.

That dark night a “man” comes to Jacob and begins to wrestle with him. The struggle is great and lasts until daybreak. Then Jacob realizes he has been wrestling with God. It is the symbol of Jacob’s life. He’s actually been wrestling with God for a long time. It is the symbol of our lives as well. We, too, believe in the blessing, but some nights you have to fight to keep believing, to hold onto the promise.

This struggle is not a sign of Jacob’s lack of faith. This is the drama of a man who believes in God’s promise to bless him, but he cannot see how it will happen. When you watch a child you raised in the church grow up to reject the faith, when you discover you have an awful disease, when you’ve lost your job and have no idea how you will pay your bills, those aren’t just personal problems. When you read about violence in the Middle East, that isn’t just a political problem. For people who believe in God’s sovereignty, they are theological problems. If Jacob had no faith, he would simply accept life as it is. But Jacob takes God far too seriously for that. He cannot live one more day with the contradictions between his faith and how it is. Clearly, he cannot make blessings happen, and every time he’s tried he’s only made a mess of his life. So now that he has hold of God, he will not let go. The man says, “Let me go for the day is breaking.” Jacob replies, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

In the course of this struggle with God, Jacob’s hip is thrown out of its socket, crippling him. What could be worse than a hustler who can no longer run? So now he just hangs onto God, refusing to let go until he gets his blessing. This is the critical position of faith – broken, exhausted, with hands empty to cling to God.

At daybreak, the blessing finally comes. It was not the blessing Jacob, or we, imagined. He receives no wealth, esteem, or any of Esau’s success. No, the blessing is a new name. No longer would he be called Jacob, which means striver. “Your name shall be Israel, because you have struggled with God and others and have prevailed.” Prevailed? How has this crippled, bankrupt, hustler prevailed? He has learned to cling to God. That was the blessing all along. It takes a few years and a whole lot of mistakes to learn this: the blessings of life come not from what you are holding, but from realizing who is holding onto you.

The next morning, it was finally time to confront his old issue with Esau. Jacob hobbled toward him and then fell to the ground before him. “But Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept.”

Whatever the great dream struggle is in your life, whether it’s a struggle with family, love, work, others, or even yourself, it is first of all a struggle with God. You will never find grace in the world around you, until you first find it with God.

Benediction: It is not hard to be thankful for the wonderful blessings in life. But can you also give thanks for the wounds that make you cling to God? Those are the blessings that change your life. Amen.