Sunday, October 23, 1983
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM JACOB
Genesis 28:10-17, 32:22-30

Jacob is one of the genuine heroes of the Old Testament and one of our ancestors in religious faith. In spite of this, no effort is made to gloss over his faults or to present him as a perfect character according to the stories about him in the book of Genesis.

Jacob is depicted as both strong and weak; at times trustworthy, at other times deceptive; he is courageous, but in some circumstances cowardly. To those of us who find our own experience at time bewildering and ambiguous, Jacob seems close. We can take assurance from the fact that God was willing to work with people like Jacob — with his weakness and his strength.

Thus, there is much we can learn from Jacob, both from his successes and his failures.

Jacob's father was Isaac and his mother Rebekah. He had a twin brother named Esau, but Jacob and Esau were about as different as brothers can be. The book of Genesis describes them in this way: "When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents." And there was trouble in the family because Esau was the favorite son of Isaac and Jacob the favorite of Rebekah.

Technically, Esau was the oldest, having been born first, and thus would be the official head of the family upon Isaac's death. However, Jacob took advantage of his brother's weakness and one day was able to buy this birthright from his brothers for nothing more than a bowl of pottage.

And if that were not enough, later when their father, Isaac, was about to die, Jacob, with the help of his mother, was able to cheat Isaac out of his father's blessing. When Jacob had managed to trick his brother out of his birthright, he had acted alone; now his mother is the moving spirit. Where Jacob's interests were at stake, she had a cleverness and a determination that rose completely to meet the occasion.

When she overheard Isaac's words to Esau, indicating that he was about to give Esau his final blessing, she acted instantly. Calling Jacob and telling him what she had heard, she said to him, "Now, therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you." So together they devised a plan wherein Jacob would dress up as Esau, and since Isaac, their father, was now almost blind, he would not be able to tell the difference.

So, Jacob prepared a meal and brought it to his father, Isaac, and received his father's final blessing before he died.

This deception only made wider the chasm between the two brothers. Thus, the writer of Genesis says: "Now Esau hated Jacob... and he said to himself... 'As soon as it is possible, I will kill my brothers.'" Again, Rebekah found out what Esau was planning to do, and she warned Jacob to leave home as soon as possible. She arranged for him to visit her brother Laban and promised him that as soon as Esau's anger had cooled, she would send word so that he could return home.

So, Jacob left his home and traveled toward his uncle's house. And it was in his running away from his troubles that Jacob had an unusual spiritual experience. Here was a guilty, burdened, remorseful individual who had an experience of God in an expected way.

He experienced God in an unforgettable dream. He was a fugitive, and he was afraid, yet his dream was one of affirmation. The message was: even though you are running away, even though your life has not been what it should have been, God is not far from you.

It was the kind of religious experience that young people often have... one that makes an enormous impression on an individual, but then later fades into the background as that person gets busy making a living.

And this is what happened to Jacob. He continued his journey until he came to his uncle's home. There he met Laban's daughters and fell in love with the younger one, whose name was Rachel. So strong was his feeling for her that he promised to work for Laban for seven years if he could have Rachel as his wife. After the seven years were up and it was time for the wedding, his uncle tricked him and at the last minute substituted his old daughter, Leah, and it wasn't until after the marriage ceremony that Jacob realized he had married the wrong woman.

Being a tenacious man, Jacob agreed to work another seven years if he could also have Rachel as his wife. One of the most beautiful sentences in this whole story of Jacob and Rachel is made by the storyteller in Genesis: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

Jacob had the second major religious experience of his life again when he was on a journey — this time as he was heading back home, after having been away for many years. He hoped to be able to make peace with Esau, his brother, and at the same time he was also running from his problems with his uncle.

Now he is a man approaching mid-life. He has accumulated a fortune. Still, he has not found peace of mind. He has not learned how to deal rightly with others. Excelling as a schemer, he has outwitted his partner in business. How would his brothers receive him after all these years?

Jacob sent messengers on ahead to let his brother know that he was coming home. He also sent gifts to his brother to let him know that he was coming in peace and wanted his brother's forgiveness.

It is in the midst of all of this turmoil that Jacob "wrestles with God." Many people come back to asking religious questions when they reach mid-life, like Jacob. It is then and then only that some begin to wrestle with the meaning of existence. He had made his fortune, built his empire, but there was still something missing in his life. The religious idealism of his youth had faded. He was successful as far as the world is concerned.

In the earlier stages of his life, Jacob had developed an "escapist" strategy in dealing with problems. Again and again, he attempted what has been called a spatial solution to difficulty — that is, "turn tail and run" when anything threatening appeared on the horizon. This is a strategy we all utilize at the beginning of life, I suppose. But Jacob soon learned that here was a solution that really does not solve anything in a practical sense. For one thing, you usually take the germs of the problem with you into a new situation and very quickly reproduce the same set of circumstances all over again.

Or, when escaping from something is your only concern, you rarely pay attention to the situation into which you are fleeing, and it can turn out to be worse than where you were. The prophet Amos spoke of “fleeing a lion, only to run into a bear.” And this is exactly what Jacob did when he got into trouble with his brother and father at home through manipulations and then fled to his uncle, only to get in trouble the same way and have to flee again.

But on the way home, he showed that he had learned from the past and was not ready to make some changes in his life. He accepted the fact at last that “the only way out is the way through” — that the “good news comes from facing up to the bad news,” not running from it.

Coming to terms with reality, this is the first step in dealing with any situation, so Jacob adopted a new strategy. Much of the old manipulation cunning was still in Jacob — he sent his wives and children and several gifts ahead, hopefully to soften up Esau — but it is clear that Jacob intended this time to face the music, no matter what it was.

In this spirit, he spent the night alone by the brook Jabbok and these found himself wrestling with a manifestation of God. In so doing, of course, he was also wrestling with himself, for to wrestle with God is also to wrestle with your inner self — with your goals, with what meaning you find in life. This was a much deeper religious experience than the one he had had as a young man.

And for all the mystery of this midnight struggle, at least it became evident that Jacob was no longer an escapist; he moved from being an “evader” to a “facer-upper,” and the end result of all this was that he was blessed. A new quality emerged in Jacob which is seen in his words, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” In other words, “I will not let go of this experience, of this soul-searching, of this inner questioning, of this wrestling with God, until I have learned from this what there is to be learned.”

Sometimes we do let go of experiences too soon, before we have learned what there is to be learned. Some incidents are so earth-shaking that we try to get away from them too fast, and then we allow the experience to be wasted.

In the good and evil which made up Jacob, there were two factors of nobility that saved him. The first was an awareness that life has a divine meaning above its material fact, and the second quality, revealed here in his wrestling, was his determination. He had struggled all night until he was lame and agonized; but he held on. In failure, as well as in success, he would not let the experience go until he had wrung a blessing from it. Certainly, there is always a time to let you, but there is also a time to hang on.

Yet with all the growth and change that occurred in Jacob as the result of his spiritual experiences, there were some areas of his life that did not change. Like us, he was not altogether consistent. I am no referring to the way he treated his children. Joseph and Benjamin became his favorites, which caused a large amount of jealousy among his other children. The ironic thing about this is that Jacob himself had been plagued all his life by this very problem in the family in which he grew up. As I mentioned earlier, he had been the favorite child of his mother, Rebekah, while Esau had been the favorite of his father, Isaac.

So, Jacob suffered in his own life from this flaw of parental favoritism, but when it came time to be a parents himself, he made the same mistake and proceeded to bring on the same kind of havoc among his own children.

Jacob never did achieve perfect consistency in his life, but God did not let him go or abandon him for that reason. We all have glaring inconsistencies in our makeup, yet God does not give up on us, either.

What happened to Jacob is profoundly true of all of us: he was tempted at the point of his greatest strengths, not at the point of his weaknesses. Sometimes we make a big mistake in thinking that good and evil are easily separated and that we can always plainly tell one from the other.

The truth is that good and evil are most often subtly entwined together, which means that precisely where I can do my best work is also where I am capable of doing the most harm. Any virtue pushed too far can become a vice. This is vividly illustrated in the story of Jacob.

Remember, his strongest gift was his drive and ambition and sensitivity to the higher things of life. But Jacob's commendable drive and energy and concern for the things of God led him into some very questionable processes of manipulation and deception. Thus, at time he was so intent on doing good that he wound up doing bad things in the process. This is always the special temptation of the highly committed and the super-dedicated.

I repeat: good and evil are often not totally separated from each other, but subtly intertwined. Any virtue or strength overdone becomes a vice, which is a warning to all of us to be especially careful in the area of our greatest giftedness. There our most subtle temptations can be expected to arise.

Fortunately for Jacob, in his wrestling with God he was able to face up to this temptation. We are told that as a result of his wrestling with God, he became lame. His thigh was thrown out of joint. But the lame Jacob was to be a better man than the Jacob who had not been lame. It is often the case that hurts can make us better people.

After this wrestling with God, a new humility begins to appear in Jacob. He is now able to confess his wrong to Esau, his brother, ask forgiveness, and start anew.

The story of Jacob's wrestling ends on a bright note. Being ready now to recognize his shortcomings, he could begin to pass beyond them. He knew he was lame, and so had stopped thinking of himself as a person of unlimited fitness and unlimited gifts. Instead, he was willing to learn what God might do with him. And to learn that lesson may be the last and greatest lesson for any one of us. Amen.