

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
New Identity
 Genesis 35:1 – 15

My sister, Kjersten, is two years and two months older than me. Growing up, she was my best friend and role model. Whatever Kjersten did, I wanted to do. Whatever presents she got, I wanted. In my mind, she was the coolest, no matter what *she* may have thought of herself.

When Kjersten was ten, she received her first brand-new bike, and it was glorious! It was an *adult* bike and had ten speeds! It even showed off her favorite colors, purple and pink (which were, of course, *my* favorite colors too – except my favorite colors were pink and purple)!

When I saw that bike, my jealousy eyes got *huge!* I *needed* that bike! I knew it would be two short months before my eighth birthday, and I needed to think quickly. How much convincing did I need to do to in order for my parents to know that I was old enough and deserving enough, to get a bike just like that? As I reasoned with myself, I realized that there was a gift that I wanted even *more* than a new bike, a Felicity American Girl doll! She had the red hair I always wanted, and was a very expensive doll, a doll I knew my parents might not *ever* buy me. My almost eight-year-old brain knew that I needed to be cunning. My parents knew how much I wanted Kjersten's bike, and they might have even been inclined to buy me a bike so that it would seem fair. But more than a bike, I wanted an expensive doll.

So I went to my mom, hoping she would be a captive audience. I laid the groundwork. I told her that Kjersten's bike had been glorious, a bike *anyone* would want! But I didn't need things to be fair – maybe just an American girl doll would suffice this year.

I was not the most normally cunning kid in the world, so I had no idea whether or not my effort would work. And on my eighth birthday, I received none other than the Felicity doll! I couldn't believe it!

I share this story, because as much as I would prefer to see myself, and everyone else, as singularly "good" or "bad" people, every last *one* of us is complex. Sometimes we are cunning, sometimes we are selfless, sometimes we act evil, the list goes on... And the characters we encounter in Scripture are complex too. Perhaps we need this reminder, as we encounter one of the *glorious fathers of the faith*, Jacob.

Jacob is the protagonist, yet it's frankly difficult to know what to do with him. He cunningly convinces his brother to sell him his *birthright*. Then, he colludes with his mother to cheat his brother out of his father's *blessing*. He cheats his brother out of birthright and his blessing. He has taken everything he can from his brother, so his only option is to run away, when *finally* he gets a taste of his own medicine! He works for 7 years to marry a beautiful woman, but discovers that his *father-in-law* has tricked him into marrying the homelier older sister! The culture of the day had no qualms with polygamy, so Jacob makes a plan to work for his father-in-law for *another* 7 years to finally marry the woman he *actually* wants to marry.

Jacob has everything – wives, children, his brother's birthright *and* blessing, but now he wants to break off on his own. His father-in-law agrees to separate the livestock with him, but Jacob tricks him *again*, so that he can take even *more* with him!

Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, comments that even the *narrator* doesn't seem wholly on Jacob's side. The narrator instead has a "curious fascination with and inclination toward [Jacob's brother] Esau, the [one] who has 'natural rights.' [Yet], the claim of Jacob seems to advance even against the wish of the narrator."¹

We don't have a simple story here – no flat characters; a wily protagonist named Jacob, which *means* "deceiver;" payback; deception; jealousy; fear; and later, tragic abuse and death. Yet all throughout Jacob's story, we see the unmerited *favor* and *faithfulness* of God to him.

As Brueggemann writes, "The narrator knows that the purposes of God are tangled in a web of self-interest and self-seeking...This grandson of the promise is a *rascal* compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac."² Amazingly, and in a way that seems utterly *unfair*, Scripture lists the fathers of the faith as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – *not* Abraham, Isaac, and Esau.

On our way home from a recent trip to Tahoe, I realized too late that perhaps it would have been wise for me *not* to have asked Alek about Game of Thrones. I missed that cultural phenomenon, and wondered what he thought. "Oh, you would hate it," he said. "It is way too graphic, and all of the noble characters are killed off in the first few seasons." And then he went on for, no kidding, about an *hour*, telling me about how the author overthrew standard fantasy tropes and described about ten main characters and their plight, recognizing that there were about fifty *more* main characters that he didn't even name. He went on to describe how, minus the dragons, this kind of storyline may have more accurately depicted the Middle Ages, the ancient world, and perhaps not necessarily life today, but many of our motivations.

You and I are not so simple. And neither are the characters in the Bible. It would be much simpler to think of ourselves as purely good, and those we don't like as purely evil. We would *really* like to believe that life, and God's purposes, follow predictable and honorable patterns. You and I would like to know that we will be rewarded for obedience to God, for making honorable and respectable decisions, for being good people really. But the older we get, the more we realize that life is *not* fair and that God is *not* so simple. This is in fact the very *point* of the book of Job, which is commonly thought of as the first book of the Bible to be written. The whole *conceit* of the book is to fly in the face of the Law of Retribution, the belief that you and I are rewarded for doing good, and punished for doing evil. Job is the story of an honorable man, who has *everything* taken from him. And when he *least* expects it, God *extravagantly* gives to him, more than he had at the beginning.

In the story of Jacob, God chose the deceitful, younger brother, who lived a life of fear and estranged relationships, to be the father of many nations and kings. By all accounts, God should have chosen Esau, the older brother. But God *didn't*.

Somehow, you and I have inherited the notion that we are *not* to ask "why," that only "bad," "juvenile," or "unfaithful" people ask why. But Scripture gives us the *opposite* example. Job asks "why," and God does not rebuke him. The psalmist asks "why," and it seems rather *normal, encouraged*, in fact. One theologian wrote that asking "why" is in fact, the *beginning* of theology.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, 205.

² Brueggemann, 204.

Author and theologian, Frederick Buechner, wrote a segment on Job in his book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. Job does not hear from God in quite some time, and “it is out of [a] whirlwind that Job first hears God say, ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge’ (Job 42:3). It is out of the absence of God that God makes himself present, and it is not just the whirlwind that stands for his absence, not just the storm and chaos of the world that knocks into a cocked hat all man’s attempts to find God in the world, but God is absent also from all Job’s words about God, and from the words of his comforters, because they are words without knowledge that obscure the issue of God by trying to define him as present in ways and places where he is not present, to define him as moral order, as the best answer man can give to the problem of his life. God is not an answer man can give, God says. God himself does not give answers. He gives himself, and into the midst of the whirlwind of his absence gives himself.”³

In the story of Jacob, there are many instances where God seems absent, where we might expect Him to show up and He doesn’t. And then He is present and makes promises in times and in ways that seemingly make *no sense*. Before Jacob reunites with his brother, Esau, God *fights* him. And of all things, Jacob *wins*, but not without an injury. God puts out his hip, and gives him a new name, Israel, which seems to mean, “He struggles with God.” Talk about interesting! Jacob begins as “deceiver” and ends as one who “struggles with God.”

As we will see in this journey through Scripture this year, Israel and his descendants *will* struggle with God. They will serve their own interests and their own causes, and God will choose to intervene and not intervene in surprising ways. They will try to manipulate and cause God to serve their purposes, but God will not be managed.

In God’s own timing and in a way only God can, He will send His only Son to be born of a virgin. His ministry will first be to the descendants of Israel and then to the entire world. He will be the only perfect Person ever to live, yet he will be despised and rejected by many. Because when he comes, he will upset the whole applecart! The first will be last and the last will be first. The impoverished, despised, and “sinners” will often be the ones to truly see him. Jesus will not be who many want him to be.

And Jesus is not what *we* are tempted to want him to be. Jesus is not a meek god, alongside many other gods; he is not a set of beliefs that we agree to; he is not the symbol of our highest ideals; he is not our good luck charm or our genie.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians: Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith,

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, 43.

established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant” (Col 1:15 – 23).

Through no goodness of your own, but out of God’s great love for you, Jesus has chosen *you*. And he has reconciled you to God the Father, through his death on the cross! Through your baptism into Christ Jesus, you were baptized into his death. You were “buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, [you] too may live a new life” (Rom 6:3 – 4). “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17).

You have been chosen and given a *new* identity; you are a *new* creation, a child of God. And *you*, child of God, have been given a purpose, the message of reconciliation. “[You] are therefore Christ’s [ambassador], as though God were making his appeal through [you]” to the world (2 Cor 5:20a).

May the light of Christ shine through you, child of God! Amen.