



Sermon

Sunday, November 11, 2018

Charleston, SC

10:30 am Chapel & 6:00 pm Sermon ~ Genesis 28, John 1:43-51

Your Dreams and God's Promises

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The greatest Villain of all time: Felonious Gru. Gru proves that yes, bad guys can become good guys. I mean, how can you not love Gru! And another baddie gone goodie we think about this time of year: The Grinch, who lived on Mt. Crumpit, just north of Whoville. And we all know what happened to him!

But today, and as we continue our Gospel Project journey, we come to one baddie turned Goodie that might surprise you - Jacob. My 84-year-old mother would call Jacob a louse. She always used that word when we were young. A louse, a really bad guy. Surprising, because Jacob's father is Isaac after all. The miracle child of Abraham! How could Abraham's grandson be such a loser!

Here's the inside scoop on Jacob. Long story short, he's a crook. Twice he cheats his lame-brained brother Esau out of his inheritance. Once he takes advantage of his father Isaac's blindness and plays him for a sucker. He out-cons his double-crossing father-in-law Laban. But it was his deception of Esau that continued to haunt him. Robbing his own twin Esau out of his rightful birthright was one step too far. Esau has enough and threatens Jacob's life. So Genesis 28 is the story of Jacob running away from his estranged brother.

Quick time out. I don't know if any of you have estranged family members, but there is nothing more exhausting

than being out of relationship with someone within our family. To be honest with you, my father and I were estranged for a couple of months some years ago and I can tell you, it made me weep. Out of this kind of estrangement Jacob is running, in fact he's run 55 miles by the time we catch up with him. He's alone, terrified, and faithless. This is Jacob we're talking about, the grandson of Abraham, son of Isaac. How could he have no faith? My friends, what this tells us is that God Himself has no grandchildren. Every generation has to come to God in faith. Jacob proves it doesn't matter who our fathers and grandfathers are, every father and grandfather has to plant those seeds of faith into their next of kin. It does not happen automatically. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, was much like Jacob until he converted at age 22.

Back to Jacob. Out of sheer exhaustion on the journey, he collapses and falls asleep. Here's where it gets super-natural. How many of you remember your dreams? Not many of us. I remember about a 10th of mine. Jacob would never forget this dream. Jacob dreams there was a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels moving up and down, with golden sandals and rainbow-colored wings. And at the top, God Himself. Yet, that visual, as incredibly beautiful as it was, pales in comparison to what Jacob hears from the voice of God in the dream. You and I sitting in the bleachers would expect God to say, "Jacob...! Why are you

making such poor decisions!" No, in a breathtaking display that defines the word Grace, God pours life into Jacob! Grace, remember, is one-way love, love expecting nothing in return. God pours grace into Jacob. "Jacob, the land you're on is sacred. From that land a great nation will come." By the way, that's the very same promise God gave to his grandfather Abraham. And then God gets personal. "P.S., Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. I am that bridge between heaven and earth." Jacob has done nothing to deserve this love. God does not love people because of who they are, but because of who He is. It is the character of God's heart to love his people, not because of who they are, but because of who He is.

Can "we" love like that? It's so intensely personal. I am with you Jacob, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. So intimate, it should bring us to tears! All Jacob can do in return is one thing - he worships. This is what he sings: "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place, I can feel his mighty power and his grace. I can hear the rush of angels wings. I see glory on each face. Surely the presence, of the lord is in this place." Jacob would never be the same again. God does not love people because of who they are, But because of who He is. Can we love like that?

Okay, another Baddie gone Goodie. Let's jump quickly into the New Testament and let me introduce you to this guy, Nathaniel. Nathaniel had a

friend named Philip who asked him to come and meet Jesus. Nathaniel responds, "Where's he from? Nazareth? Nothing good could come from there." And that's when, just like Jacob, God pours grace into Nathaniel, this time through Jesus. Jesus looks at this newbie Nathaniel and says, "Nathaniel, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." It's the same vision from Genesis, with one major difference. In the Old Testament, God is saying the way to me is via the ladder of angels, prophets, and the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But now in the New Testament, that ladder is through Jacob's many-times-over great grandson, Jesus Christ. God loves us so much, he gave His only son Jesus to be the exclusive ladder to heaven. Heaven will open and the angels of God will be ascending and descending on the Son of Man, Jesus himself. No other lineage. No other gods. No works of ours will get us to heaven. I think of Jesus when he would later say, "I am the way, truth and life, no one comes to the Father but by me." I think of Paul who, in his letter to Timothy, would write, "There is One God and one mediator, that is, one ladder between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave Himself up as a ransom for all." Paul to the Hebrews, Chapter 9, writes, "Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant!" Humanity has been restored by Jesus being that ladder.

My friends, here is the central truth. We all have a good dose of Gru, the Grinch, Jacob, and Nathaniel in us. We all have dysfunctional families. We ourselves all have dysfunctional hearts and minds. We are all broken, aren't we? We all have some baddy in us. We have all messed up, we've deceived. Yet, Jesus doesn't love us for who we are, what we've done, who we're related to, or how sinful or good our past was. He loves us for who He is! So much so He sends his only Son Jesus to be our ladder back to heaven, and all we have to say like Nathaniel is, Jesus,

Truly, You are the Son of God. Forgive me of my past and restore me to you.

This is what makes Christianity different from every other world religion. As that British Journalist Malcom Muggeridge writes, "Over the course of time, there have been many who tried to be God. But only the one True God, out of love for us, was willing to become man." God through the person, of the man Jesus Christ, is with us.

My friends, do you feel as if you're too far gone to be saved? Just done too many bad things? Too far gone to be used by Jesus? Too far gone to be forgiven? Too far gone to receive love and give love? Jacob should prove you otherwise! Nathaniel should prove that it's not about who we are, but Who God is. C.S. Lewis puts it so much better than I could, as he writes, "God loves us not because we're lovable, but because He is love." Not because he needs to receive but because He delights to give.

Again, I ask, can we love like that? And further, who in our lives do we need to love like that? There are people that God puts into our lives that I call EGR's, Extra Grace Required folks. You know, the hard-to-love people. By the way, that describes every one of us. But in our lives, there are People that are hard to love – friends, coworkers, maybe even some around your Thanksgiving table. Can we love the way God loves? The answer is no, unless we allow Jesus to love through us to others.

Let me end with this. I know I've told this story before but there is no other story that illustrates the power of the Grace of God through Jesus Christ. It's the story of a son estranged from his own father. The son had done some mighty bad things. He had stolen, betrayed, and had really hurt the heart of his father. Yet over the years, the estrangement grew to a crescendo and for the son, he knew he couldn't live another season with the anvil of pain

around his neck. Finally, he sends an email to his father and says, "I'm taking the 6pm train home from New York City, I need to see you. Yet I understand if you never want to see me again, you have the right after all I've done wrong. In fact, as you know, the train rounds that bend and from the bend I can see our back yard. If you accept my offer of me coming home, just put out a bed sheet on the clothes line, and I'll know to get off at the stop in town. If not, if there is no bed sheet, I'll keep going and stay on the train." The man sends the email, and hears nothing back from his father. Thinking the worst, he gets on the 5pm train. The moment of truth comes, the train rounds the bend. To his shock, there isn't one bed sheet on the clothes line. No, there are about 100 sheets, and not just on the clothes line, but sheets on the roof, hanging from gutters. This is the love God has for Jacob. The life-saving love Jesus has for you and me. Will we receive it? Will we give it?