

“Grace & Love” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
July 23, 2017 Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 28:10-19a

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

A ladder to heaven - which is more often translated a stairway to heaven - has certainly captured our culture's imagination. Direct access to God. What more could we want?

Why a stairway? Most likely Jacob's dream is set in the context of Ancient Mesopotamia where literal stairways to heaven were built on high hills – one per hill. The people believed earth and heaven met at these places and their gods lived there. This reality probably influenced Jacob's dream since he would be familiar with these structures.

This idea of a stairway to heaven has influenced our culture. There's that famous Led Zeppelin song, Stairway to Heaven: "There's a lady who's sure All that glitters is gold And she's buying a stairway to heaven." I even found that there's a stairway to heaven in Hawaii with 3,922 steps – and there were articles on the web with helpful hints on how to make it to the top without collapsing.

But the stairway is not the important thing in this scripture though it captures our imagination. What's important? It is what God speaks directly to Jacob in his dream. It is what God promises when God speaks. This scripture reveals the character of God. And this scripture provides an example of how we can be forgiving and loving as we grow in our faith.

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

What gracious words! What a wonderful promise. Wouldn't you love to dream such a promise from God?

Does Jacob deserve to have such a blessing and assurance? God is saying these words to a less than loving and kind person. You may remember that Jacob was a twin. Esau was his brother. Jacob was alone in the wilderness sleeping under the stars because he was on the run from his brother. As the younger son, he had just cheated his older brother out of their father Isaac's blessing – by deception. Jacob was on the

run because his brother was going to kill him for what Jacob had done. Jacob was a shifty guy that you probably would not trust if you met him. Jacob was self-centered. We'd probably call him a spoiled brat if he were alive today. And now God is blessing him!

What does that say about our great God? That says a lot. The God of Abraham and Isaac is a gracious, loving God who works through our less than stellar behavior to bless us – in spite of ourselves and all that we do to mess up.

How did Jacob respond to God's good news? I didn't read this part of the scripture, but let me do that now. These verses finish the chapter:

“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”

IF, if? “If God will be with me.” What is Jacob saying? Does he not believe God? Jacob makes his allegiance to God conditional. If God will do these things, then Jacob vows he will believe him. Now, that's the response of someone quite self-centered.

Do you know someone who is self-centered like that, who gets in the way of what God is trying to accomplish and puts conditions on God?

What blows me away is that God loves such people; that God's forgiveness and grace are there for people who act that way. God treated a schemer and self-centered Jacob with forgiveness and a blessing. God will do the same for all of us no matter what we've done. That's God's grace.

So, the real story in this scripture is what we learn about the character of our God.

The question I have for you today: How are you responding to God's grace and love? How are you sharing God's generosity of grace and love with others? Do you try to be as forgiving as God was of Jacob?

Jacobs' story continues in Genesis and Exodus. Twenty years after Jacobs encounter with God, the story I read, Jacob, the self-centered, scheming young man does return home to meet his brother. But he no longer bargains with God as he prepares for the trip. He has grown in his faith. He acknowledges his unworthiness and God's faithfulness. I think it's worth reading Jacob's prayer to God. Listen to what Jacob prays in advance of meeting Esau.

And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the

faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’” (Genesis 32:9-12).

Gone is the if statement in Jacob’s youthful vow. Now we hear Jacob praying in trust and humility. Jacob trusts God and asks God to deliver him from the hand of his brother, Esau.

You may remember from reading the story of the twin brothers meeting that Esau welcomed Jacob with open arms and no hatred. Esau had forgiven Jacob.

We truly serve a loving and forgiving God. God is generous beyond our wildest imagination. God forgives and loves. We may not forgive someone, but God will. We may hold a grudge that cripples us, but God doesn’t. God loved us so much that God died on the cross so we could understand what it is to be in right relationship with God and each other.

I say every Sunday that we strive to live, love and serve others as Jesus did when he was on earth. Jacob’s story shows us that we can be forgiven and can put the past behind us and live, love and serve others.

Did you notice where God is in relationship to Jacob when God speaks God’s promise. **And the Lord stood beside him.** God is not at the top of the stairway looking down. God stood beside Jacob. God is standing beside you as well. You don’t need to climb to the top of a stairway to meet our loving God. God is among us, forgiving us and gently leading us to forgive and love as Jesus does.

That’s good news!