

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 26, 2026
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Genesis 29:15-28

"Jacob - What Goes Around, Comes Around"

A couple summers ago, our granddaughter Jacquelynn, her husband, Michael, and their kids, Leon and Astrid came over for a little pool party. They had great fun splashing and sliding around in their pool. Watching them took me back to my summer days playing in sprinklers and slip n' slide. And it also made me think of a time 30 years ago when I was a small group leader at Synod Youth Workshop in Tulsa Oklahoma.

On a designated fun day, my group decided to make our own slip n' slide using sheets of heavy plastic and dish soap. We set up about 50 feet of plastic and poured soap all over it and the senior high youth had a blast slipping and sliding. In fact, they were having so much fun that I decided to join in the fun.

I remembered when I was a kid and figured I could do this. I thought, "I'll show them how it's done!" I had images of sailing through the air and sliding gracefully along the plastic to the cheers of my small group. So, I ran at full speed, which 30 years ago was a whole lot slower than at age 12, and planned to launch myself in the air like I had done when I was 12.

However, my launch was more like a crash landing as I felt a snap in my ribcage and skidded along the length of the plastic on my belly. I laid at the bottom of the slip n' slide wheezing and coughing as I struggled to get up. I laughed off my effort but the pain reminded me that I definitely wasn't 12 anymore. I didn't break anything but my bruised ribs were just as painful as my bruised ego.

One of the things that young people don't get about being older is that our bodies age but our minds, our self-perception doesn't. Trapped inside this ¾ century old body is the mind of a 20 year old man who wants to do things for which his body isn't prepared. That's a lesson that I never seem to fully learn no matter my age.

In that sense, we have a lot in common with our spiritual ancestor, Jacob. He was a man who didn't want to accept his limitations and who was always getting into trouble because of it. We met Jacob last week when he was on the run from his brother Esau whom he had tricked out of his inheritance. Jacob had this miraculous vision at Bethel which seemed to convert his spirit. But as often happens, his behavior lagged woefully behind.

Not even the knowledge of his special place in the scheme of things had changed his pattern of behavior. As some would say, Jacob hadn't gotten his "comeuppance" yet – no one had remonstrated him for his unethical behavior. But he was about to learn an invaluable lesson about ambition. Ambition is a quality that we all need in order to succeed. But when ambition is given free rein, it becomes narcissistic.

Jacob was an ambitious man who allowed his ambitions to overrun his ethics, his ability to distinguish right from wrong – something fairly common among politicians. Jacob's ambition for prestige, power and wealth overpowered his loyalty to his own family. His ambitiousness clouded his vision so that he didn't even bat an eye at conning his brother out of his birthright and his father into a blessing.

He probably justified his behavior by saying, "I'm just trying to climb the ladder (he really liked that image) of success." The problem was that he didn't care who he had to climb over on the way to the top. He had clutched the long end of the stick so many times, taking advantage of others, that he had gotten used to having his way. But, as so often happens in life, things which are uneven in the short run, have a way of evening out in the long run.

Little did Jacob know that when he wandered into his uncle's camp, he had met his match - the "step-er" was about to become the "step-ee." Uncle Laban was also an ambitious man, who quickly realized that he had the advantage over Jacob because he had something that Jacob wanted - a daughter named Rachel.

Actually, Laban had two daughters. Leah, the oldest, was described as having lovely eyes, sort of the Hebraic way of saying that she was no beauty but was very nice. On the other hand, the writers of Genesis take pains to say that Rachel was graceful and beautiful. The moment that Jacob laid eyes on Rachel, he was smitten. He fell head over sandals in love with her, which was wonderful.

However, Jacob put Rachel at the top of his list of things to acquire, which was not so wonderful, because that objectified her - it made her a possession to be bought rather than a woman to be wooed. Jacob's ardent desire to have Rachel made him throw caution to the wind as he bartered with Laban for her hand in marriage. Knowing that he had no property or money to give Laban, he offered to work for Laban for seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage, an excessive offer, even in the Middle-East where such things were routinely done.

Jacob knew that he was stepping out of line by asking to marry the younger daughter when the older daughter was still available. That's why he made such an extravagant offer, figuring that by making Laban an offer he couldn't refuse, it would be Laban who would be forced to go against tradition.

Laban was a "cagey" sheep-trader, who knew a good deal when he saw it. But he also knew that he couldn't violate the time-honored tradition of marrying off daughters from the eldest to the youngest. The sly old fox got the best of both worlds by uttering a non-committal statement with a loophole big enough to drive a limousine through: "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

If Jacob had been himself, he would have noticed the flimsy commitment of Laban, but he was blinded by his own ambition to have Rachel as his wife. To be sure, Jacob did love Rachel, but not even love can derail ambition once it gets rolling. Ambition, when pushed to its extreme, has a way of overwhelming us. Good judgement, ethical behavior, reason, and common sense can be flattened when they get in the way of ambition, because ambition is concerned only with the self, not with the community.

Many of the difficulties that we experience in society today can be attributed not to lack of ambition, but to excessive ambition. Too many people are ambitious only for themselves. Many in our society have focused on self-indulgence and have lost sight of the greater good of the community. We don't have to look any further than the alarming increase of lawsuits that attest to the fact that more and more people are approaching life with a "what's in it for me?" attitude.

There used to be a time when people voted on issues based upon the greater good of the community. Self-sacrifice was commonplace. Now, however, people make decisions based upon whether they directly benefit from a proposal.

When I was a kid, my report card had a category called "citizenship" which graded my behavior toward others. The more kindness I showed; the more respect I gave; the more helpful I was; the higher my grade would be. To this day, I carry that notion of citizenship - being helpful, respectful, generous and kind. I fear that those who share my definition of citizenship may be a vanishing breed.

We can recover this concept of what it means to live in community only by corralling our own self-serving ambitions and giving free rein to an ambitious vision of community. Part of the hard lesson Jacob learned from his Uncle Laban was that living in community means taking responsibility for the welfare of others.

After Jacob had completed seven years of servitude to his uncle, he went to Laban to collect his prize, Rachel. Laban sent out wedding invitations and arranged for a traditional wedding feast that would last a week. On the wedding night, Jacob was so overcome with joy that he failed to notice that Laban had switched daughters on him. Perhaps weak eyesight ran in the family.

When Jacob awakened on the morning after the wedding with Leah rather than Rachel at his side, he was furious. He stormed out of his tent and confronted Laban for his double-

dealing ways. Laban's reply was, "This is not done in our country - giving the younger before the firstborn."

Thunder crashed and lightning flashed in Jacob's head as he felt the impact of those words – the older sibling takes precedence over the younger, which is exactly what Jacob was guilty of violating with his older brother Esau. He had defied not only tradition, but also basic ethical standards by cheating his brother, the firstborn, out of his rightful inheritance and honor.

Preoccupied with thoughts of his own dishonorable life, Jacob acquiesced without an argument to Laban's proposal to give Rachel in marriage to him at the end of the week-long feast, as long as Jacob worked for Laban another seven years. Thus, at the end of the week, he emerged with not one, but two wives (not necessarily a double blessing).

The value of the lesson Jacob learned that day cannot be underestimated. What Jacob learned was not so much that, "every silver lining has a cloud," (although that is true) but that ambition alone does not lead to happiness; ambition for others does. Jacob's conscience came to life that day as he realized that he could no longer live in isolation from others, looking out exclusively for his own interests - he was responsible for the welfare of others in the community in which he lived.

God worked a great wonder in Jacob's life through Laban, to bring him back into the community. This is the point from which Jacob began to assume his rightful stature as our spiritual ancestor, because this is when Jacob was no longer set apart from the community, but became a part of the community.

Jacob experienced a rule that I learned a long time ago - "What goes around, comes around" - that which we give has a way of coming back to us. With Laban's help, Jacob learned that when deception goes around, deception comes around. With God's help, he also learned that when grace goes around, grace comes around; when love goes around, love comes around; and when forgiveness goes around, forgiveness comes around.

Maybe we can't teach an old dog new tricks, but God can. Therein lies our hope and our good news. God empowers us to give more than we get because a life lived in faith is not supposed to be transactional; it is supposed to be transformational. In Jesus Christ we can be transformed into people who know that when good goes around, good will come around, and not just to us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you

has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen