

“A Good Night’s Sleep”
Genesis 28:10-22
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Westminster, Greenville
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In one of his books, the writer Philip Yancey tells a story that first appeared in *The Boston Globe* many years ago.

It was the summer of 1990, and the *Globe* wrote about a woman and her fiancé. They needed to plan their wedding banquet. So they went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston to make the necessary arrangements.

They pored over the menu.
They made selections of appropriate china and silver.
They chose the right flowers.
The bill came to \$13,000.

After leaving a check for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home to flip through their book of wedding announcements.

The day that the announcements were supposed to hit the mail, the groom said to his fiancé, “I’m just not sure. Let’s think about this a little longer.”

NOT what the fiancé wanted to hear.

When she went back to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager was VERY understanding. “The same thing happened to me, Honey,” she said—and she told her about her own broken engagement.

But when it came to the refund, the Manager had bad news:

“The contract is binding. You’re only entitled to \$1300 back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I’m sorry. I really am.”

Now the more the jilted bride thought it over, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party. Not a wedding banquet, but a big blowout. And who would come to the party?

It just so happened that 10 years before all this, the bride had been living in a homeless shelter. She'd managed to get back on her feet, found a good job, and set aside a nest egg for herself. So now...with no wedding to celebrate...she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in June of 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as no one at the hotel had ever seen before. The hostess changed the menu to “boneless chicken”—“in honor of the groom,” she said—and she sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters in Boston.

That warm summer evening, people who were used to eating half-gnawed pizza from trash bins were served chicken cordon bleu by Hyatt waiters in tuxedos, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.¹

Now what is that story about?
Not just a once-in-a-lifetime party...

It's a story of grace, right?

Why was it grace?
Because it was an act of kindness, yes.
Because it was a free gift, a surprise gift, with no strings attached...

As the poet Mary Oliver once remarked:
“You can have the other words-
chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity.
I'll take grace. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'll take it.”²

We are continuing our sermon series today. The series is entitled “Words of Faith”. Each Sunday, the sermon is about one word—a word that is important in our Christian faith.

¹ As told by Philip Yancey in *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

² Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

The word this morning...is GRACE.

Why am I thinking of grace this morning?
Perhaps it's because of all of you.

What we have received from all of you, since the moment we arrived in Greenville, has been nothing but grace—the cards, the food, the hospitality—you didn't know us from Adam, but you have treated us like long-lost friends right from the beginning.

That's grace...and it's made a huge difference to our family.

Can you think of a time when you have received a gift of grace, and that grace has made a difference in your life?

I recall when I had just got my driver's license, 16 years old, it's a Michigan winter and I'm driving my parents' car back to the house. I'm almost home, and I know the road is slick, so I'm going nice and slow.

But I'm approaching a parked car,
and another car is coming toward me,
and it looks like the three of us—
car coming toward me, me, and the parked car—
we'll all be in the same place in the road at the same moment.

So I think, better slow down...and as soon as I hit the brakes,
I lose control of my parents' car, wheels spinning on the ice,
and I run into the parked car.

Now...I felt ENORMOUSLY guilty at that moment.
Guilty for damaging my parents' car, guiltier still for damaging a strangers' car.

So I knocked on the door of the home of the person to whom the car belonged. I told him what happened. He didn't get mad at me. He didn't demand to talk to my parents. He told me not to worry about it.

He was VERY GRACIOUS.

Of course, that graciousness came AFTER I confessed what I had done.
Which is the correct way of ordering things, right?
Confess the wrong, then receive the grace.

So perhaps I should have chosen a story with a little more MORAL COHERENCE than what we heard in our passage from Genesis today.

Because this story of Jacob's dream is a story of grace...but it's not quite like any of the stories that I just told you.

You know about Jacob, don't you?

Jacob has a twin brother named Esau.

In chapter 25 of Genesis,
 Jacob swindles his brother Esau out of Esau's birthright,
 and in chapter 27 Jacob steals their father's blessing.

Birthright and blessing, supposed to be Esau's, now they belong to Jacob.

Jacob is a crook.

Jacob is a scoundrel.

And this morning, Jacob is ON THE RUN because Esau wants to kill him for what he's done.

So writer of the 28th chapter of Genesis says this:

“He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night...
 Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head
 and lay down in that place.”

Now one might think the NEXT verse would tell us how TORMENTED Jacob was, how RESTLESS his guilty conscience made him—how he was up the ENTIRE NIGHT brooding about his behavior, wondering how he could ever make things right again.

But here's what verse 12 says:

“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

I do not know if there is a more OVERWHELMING experience of grace to be found in all of Scripture than Jacob’s dream at Bethel, this gift of wonder and amazement and beauty from God.

Because God doesn’t see fit to stop with a beautiful dream.

In the midst of this dream, God tells Jacob that God will...

- a) give Jacob the land on which he sleeps,
- b) make his offspring “like the dust of the earth,” and
- c) promises to “keep you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.”

Let me ask you something:

If you were God, is that the kind of dream that you would give to Jacob?

Jacob has not confessed or repented or done ONE THING to admit that he was in the wrong...what in the world is God thinking?

That’s not “decent and in order” grace.

That’s not “Presbyterian” grace.

That’s offensive grace.

That’s scandalous grace.

Why in the world would God choose someone like JACOB to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel?

A while back, Will Willimon reflected on his years as Dean of the Chapel at Duke.

“One night, some years ago, a fraternity invited me to give a talk.

My assigned topic was "Character and College."

I thought, I can't believe that they are dumb enough to invite an old guy like me to talk to young guys like them on "character."

So I went to their fraternity section and knocked on their door.
The door opened and I was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten.

What is a kid doing over here at this time of the night? I wondered.
Surely we have rules against young children in the dorm this late.

***"They're waiting for you in the common room," he said.
"Follow me, I'll take you there."***

We wound our way back into the common room and the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for my presentation.

As I began my remarks, I noted that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers. Shortly, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

Well, I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk I asked if they had any questions or comments.

Dead silence.
So, I thanked them and made my way out.

I heard the college kid say to the little boy,
***"You go on and get ready for bed.
I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story."***

When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out.

"Let me ask you," I said, "Who was the kid there tonight?"

*"Oh, that's Darrell," he said.
"The fraternity is part of the Big Brother program.
We met Darrell that way.
His mom's on [drugs] and having a tough time.
Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him.
So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us."*

*We go over, pick him up,
and he stays with us until it's okay to go home.*

We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff."

"That's amazing," Willimon said.

"I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible."

"I tell you what's amazing," he said as he took another drag on his cigarette, "what's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else."³

THAT'S the story of Jacob.

That God would pick a person like Jacob to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel...is nothing but unfathomable grace.

Far too often, we LIMIT the grace of God in our mind's eye,
imagining it only as something small and soft—never scandalous;
something tangible and touchable—never terrifying.

For example, when I was in that very minor car accident as a 16-year-old, part of my penance was to go back to our neighbor's house with an envelope containing a \$20 bill. It was my \$20, I put it in their mailbox, with a note that said "For the car..."

Years later, when I bought my own car for the first time and realized what insurance costs were like and what deductibles were like, it finally dawned on me that the damage I did to that neighbor's car was certainly MORE than \$20.

But I never heard from that neighbor about it.
Never got an angry note, never got a request to fix their car up...

So yes, on the one hand, grace means those simple acts of kindness and generosity and forgiveness that all of us can make every day.

³ William Willimon, "Revolution!" Pulpit Resource, Logos, January 22, 2006.

But the gentleness of one's neighbor is not the only way that grace is presented in the Bible.

In the Bible, grace comes not just in soft ways, but in DISRUPTIVE ways.

As the Apostle Paul puts it in our first passage for today:

“...by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

For Paul, that gift of grace was not cute and it was not cuddly.
It was a gift that BLINDED him on that Damascus road.
It was a gift that KNOCKED THE WIND out of Paul's sails.
It was a gift that said to Paul—you've been going the wrong way all this time, even though you thought it was the right way.

It was grace that didn't just improve Paul's life, but completely OVERTURNED his life...

Maybe this is why the writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote:

“All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”⁴

Do you know anything about THAT kind of grace?

The preacher Tony Campolo tells the story of the time he was asked to speak at a small, Pentecostal college. Before the chapel service, several faculty members took Campolo into a side room to pray with him.

Not so much with him. They prayed ON him.
They wanted the Holy Spirit to fill Campolo,
to make him as effective as he could be with the students.

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1979.

They had Campolo kneel,
 and laid hands on his head,
 and the more they prayed,
 the more they leaned on his head.

One faculty member prayed at length for a guy named Charlie Stoltzfus.

And that really annoyed Campolo,
 and he thought to himself:

If you going to lean on my head, the least you can do is pray for me.

But this guy was praying for Charlie.
 The professor prayed on and on for this guy Charlie,
 said Charlie was about to leave his wife and three children,
 said, "Don't let that man leave them! Don't let that family be
 destroyed! You know who I'm talking about, Lord...
 you know who I'm talking about...Charlie Stoltzfus.

He lives down the road about a mile on the right hand side in a silver house trailer!"

At that, Campolo thought to himself:

Give me a break. Is he really telling God where Charlie lives?

After prayer and the talk, Campolo got in his car and drove home. On the way, he picked up a hitchhiker. He got in the car, and Campolo greeted him:

"Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's your name?"
 The hitchhiker said: "My name's Charlie Stoltzfus."

Campolo turned around and started heading the other direction.

"Hey, where are you taking me?" Charlie said.
 "Home!"
 "Why?"

“Because you just left your wife and three children, right?”

Charlie said, “Right, right!”

When Campolo pulled up to Charlie’s silver house trailer, Charlie said, “How did you know I lived here?”

Campolo said, “God told me!”

And from that day forward, Charlie’s life was never the same.⁵

Now I know—that’s a story about a Pentecostal.

And we’re Presbyterian.

Do Presbyterians really believe in that kind of grace?

The kind of grace that doesn’t just nudge a life, but changes a life?

The kind of grace that doesn’t just forgive fender benders, but lets go of the deepest wrongs that you’ve endured?

The kind of grace that throws a party for the prodigal?

The kind of grace that doesn’t just love your neighbors, but loves your enemies too?

The kind of grace that doesn’t come cheap, but arrives on a cross at great cost?

The kind of grace picked up a scoundrel like Jacob and said, “Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring?”

Do Presbyterians believe in a God that offers that kind of grace to a person like Jacob?

I don’t need to hear your answer to this question.

⁵ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000.

But someone does.

Maybe that someone is in your family.

Maybe that someone is in your church.

Maybe that someone is in your neighborhood.

Someone out there right now is DESPERATE

to see and know and experience what YOU believe

about God's grace...

Amen.