

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 17, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"LIMPING HOME"

Genesis 32:31

A while back one of our members mentioned to me how much they enjoyed Old Testament stories and sermons. Well, four of my sermons so far this fall have been based on great Old Testament passages. Today we are going to talk about Jacob and a very deep and dark and mysterious episode in his life recorded in Genesis 32.

But let's look at Jacob's story from the beginning. And right off the top let's deal with the meaning of the name Jacob. Jacob and his brother Esau were twins, born to Isaac and Rebecca. Esau was born first. The Bible says that he emerged quite red and covered with hair. So they named him "Esau" which meant "hairy". Then Jacob came out grasping Esau's heel, as if he were trying to hold Esau back in order to be born first. So his parents named him "Jacob" which meant "heel-grabber." And for years, Jacob lived up, or down to that name. The very name Jacob came to mean "trickster, supplanter, cheater." In modern terms we might think of Michael Douglas as Gordon Gecko of the "Wall Street" movies. One of those movies is playing in the theatres now - what's it called - "Money Never Sleeps?" Jacob of old might have fit right in with the modern Wall Street shysters. Or maybe he was more like a shady used car salesman. Now if you have a child named "Jacob," you probably didn't know that's what the name originally meant. Today we don't give children a name based on its original meaning. Not many boys would be named "Jacob" I'm afraid, which is one of the most popular and a perfectly good boy's name.

But Jacob certainly fulfilled the meaning of his name. He was always trying to cheat someone or get ahead of them or take their place. One day when the boys were older, Esau came into the tent famished from working in the fields. He begged Jacob for some of the stew he was cooking. And Jacob said, "Sure, if I can take your birthright as the first-born son." And foolishly Esau agreed. It was short-term gain for long-term loss. Later when blind old Isaac was dying, Jacob, with his mother's help, dressed himself in hairy clothes and passed himself off as Esau. And Isaac, trembling, gave Jacob the father's blessing that was supposed to go to Esau. Esau was furious, and Jacob fled to a far land, where he worked for his uncle Laban. There Jacob fell in love with Laban's lovely daughter Rachel. Laban said, "You can have her in marriage in exchange for seven years of work." So Jacob worked hard for Laban, and the Bible says that his love for Rachel was so great that the seven years seemed as a day.

But then the trickster himself was tricked. On the wedding night Laban substituted his older and less attractive daughter Leah for Rachel. What a surprise that must have been for Jacob in the bridal suite! In any case, Jacob still wanted to marry Rachel and Laban said, "OK, for seven more years' work." Jacob agreed, but besides working for

Laban he also worked for himself, using Laban's flocks and herds to build up his own and to become wealthy. Finally he married Rachel and took his family and all he had and set out for home. Much earlier in a dream God had promised Jacob and his descendants the land of Caanan. So Jacob was taking God up on his promise. Upon reaching the Jabbock river, he first sent his wives, maids, and children across into Cannan. No doubt Jacob was fearing the reunion with Esau. So he stayed back and spent the night alone, until a mysterious figure came upon him and wrestled with him. Jacob fought back, and finally the stranger struck Jacob on the hip and put it out of joint. The stranger wanted Jacob to let him go, for the day was breaking. But Jacob said, "I won't let you go unless you bless me." And the stranger gave Jacob a new name, Israel. The stranger refused to tell Jacob his name and suddenly Jacob realized that he had been wrestling with God himself. And he called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Then Jacob crossed the Jabbock. But he was a changed man. In Genesis 32:31 we read "The sun rose on him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip."

It seems strange that God would give Jacob a handicap, a limitation. But Jacob could not enter the land as the old Jacob. He had to be made new if he was going to enter into God's promise. And this limp became a blessing in Jacob's life. God used this handicap to make Jacob into the kind of person God wanted him to be.

It is the same for us. We may want God to remove all of our handicaps and weakness. Like Paul, we may cry out for God to remove the thorn in our flesh. And God may remove some. But God left a thorn in Paul's flesh, and he leaves one or more in us, too. And if you have no thorns, no weaknesses, no handicaps, watch out - God may be giving you one. For by God's grace, a handicap can become a blessing. God uses our handicaps to make us the kind of people God wants us to be. It happened for Jacob and it happens for us, too.

First, God uses our handicaps to give us sympathy for others.

When God gave gifts to the twin boys, Jacob received five talents and Esau one. Esau was a hard worker but not the sharpest fellow in the neighbourhood. So Jacob was able to take advantage of Esau, and his blind father Isaac, too. Jacob was not only sharp in mind but strong in body, so strong that he wrestled the stranger to a draw. And his strengths made him unsympathetic to the weaknesses of others. Indeed, Jacob was a very self-centred man. He had few thoughts for the needs and feelings of others. What kind of a man would send his family across the river ahead of him into possible danger? He should have been leading the way, no matter what the danger was to himself. But that was Jacob for you, always thinking of himself. And the only way he could develop sympathy for others was by becoming weak and vulnerable himself. So God touched his hip and gave him that limp. And now with his own limitation, Jacob could relate to those who were not so strong in body and mind. Perhaps one reason Esau and Jacob reconciled when they finally met was because Jacob now had a new sympathy for his brother. He lost the desire to take advantage of him.

Look, if you've never suffered, if you've never failed, if you've never struggled, if you've never limped, so to speak, you won't have much sympathy for those who do. But God uses our handicaps to give us greater sympathy for others. Your handicap puts you on the same level as the vast majority of people you come in contact with. Look how it works out. The best teachers are often those who had to struggle to master the subject themselves. They have insight into the struggles of the struggling student. And while you always want a doctor who's highly skilled it's good also to have one who knows what it is to be ill and to suffer. It's been said that "in love's service, only the wounded can truly heal." God uses our handicaps to make us more sympathetic and compassionate towards others who have limitations. And hopefully that sympathetic spirit translates into generous and practical acts of kindness.

Then too, God uses our handicap to make us trusting children.

Jacob fought hard against the stranger in the night. That was symbolic of his resistance against God. Jacob was bound and determined to live his own way, to depend on his own strength and his own wits. Jacob was a hard nut to crack, even for God. And the only way God could break Jacob's soul and get Jacob to depend on him was to make him weak in some area. And I bet that as Jacob limped over that stream the next morning he was now praying every step of the way for God's help and guidance.

That's the kind of people God wants us to be, children who learn to call upon him and trust him in our need. And perhaps it's only at the point of our limp that we really learn to trust in God. If you never know weakness, if you never have a limitation, then you may never realize your need for God. You don't seek his help, you don't call upon him; you don't think of him because you're so used to doing it all yourself. But so often it's at the point of weakness that we learn to ask for God's help. Paul described his own situation like this, "For when I am weak, then I am strong, strong with the strength God provides."

As a child and as a young man I was terrified of public speaking. As I spoke before people my face would turn red and my words would get all jumbled. I avoided it whenever I could. But if I was going to be a preacher as God called me to be, then I really had to depend upon Him to strengthen me in my weakness. And I still do. I don't really have a natural gift. I'm still uncomfortable speaking without prepared notes. So every time I stand up to preach I am depending on God to strengthen me in my weakness.

Well, it's true for all of us in some way. God uses our limp to make us into what he desires us to be, humble, trusting children. And that's so important in the biggest issue of all. For the essence of the Gospel is that you can't save yourself from the deadly disease of sin and death. And when you know that, when you know you realize your own helplessness, when you know that all your deeds are as filthy rags, then you know that you must trust in the Crucified and Risen Christ to save you. So God works through our handicap to make us trusting children.

And finally, and this is what it all leads to - God works through our handicap to make us like Christ.

When God changed Jacob's name to Israel, he gave him a name with many significant meanings, one of which is, "May God rule." After resisting God and God's will so strongly, Jacob was a changed man after God gave him a limp. Rather than his life being based on "May Jacob rule in Jacob's life," it was now turning in the direction of "may God rule in Jacob's life." And then as verse 31 tells us, "the sun rose upon Jacob as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip."

Who are we becoming as we increase in sympathy for others, as we become God's trusting, obedient children? Well, we are becoming more like God's own beloved Son of whom it could be said, "God ruled in his life." That's what God is seeking to do with us - to form and shape us in the image of his obedient Son. And if God must leave some limitation in us in order to accomplish that goal, then so be it.

You see, our handicaps, whatever they may be, bring us closer to Christ and he to us. For did he not limp towards Calvary under the weight of the Cross? Was he not bruised for our iniquities and wounded for our transgressions, were not nails driven into his hands and feet? Yes, but the broken one was raised by the Father to live forevermore. And He is the one who leads us home. Don't despise your weaknesses and your handicaps. For God is working through them to make you the kind of person he desires you to be. God is causing the countenance of his only Son to rise upon you so that you may look up and put all your faith in Him and become more like him. And I, for one, would rather limp home with the Son of God shining upon me, than to have no limp and never go home at all.