

## Family Matters: Reaching Out, Building Up

Genesis 32:22-32  
Romans 8:22-27

July 23, 2017  
Faith Community

Jacob had been a creep of the first order. If you were here last week and did your homework, which was to read chapters 25-35 of Genesis, you saw that he was a talented guy, having done well for himself financially and all, but he made his fortune on the backs of others, most of them members of his own family. He had all the trophies of great success but in the process left a trail of deception, dishonesty and broken relationships.

Long ago he'd left home out of fear for his life because of what he had done, and now, at long last, it was time to go back. He got word to his brother Esau, whom he had treated so horribly, and word came back that Esau was on his way to meet him, but he was not coming alone. Actually, there were four hundred men with him which Jacob assumed meant he was in big trouble.

Jacob was terrified, as well he should've been. So, using the craftiness that got him into this mess in the first place, he came up with a plan to smooth out his brother's ruffled feathers. It involved elaborate staging with all kinds of gifts and expressions of humility. He got that set up with everyone in place and then spent his last night all alone, and that's when God got hold of him. At his most vulnerable, this is where he might learn that his real problem was not his brother.

***Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome."***

***The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.*** (Genesis 32:24-28, 31)

Deborah Feldman was raised in a Jewish home, and her favorite relative was her grandmother. Her grandmother had lost her entire family during World War II and was herself liberated from the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in

1945. She never talked about that with her granddaughter, who desperately wanted to learn everything she could. Finally, after she was grown and on her own, she went to Germany to trace her grandmother's steps during that awful time.

She met a young man there and they quickly became close. They went to Bergen Belsen together where she saw the photos and heard the stories, and felt this furious rage rising inside her. She learned that her young friend's grandfather had been in the SS and his grandmother loved to brag that she had kissed Hitler's hand once.

Her grandmother was all she had left. His grandparents had been part of the devastation.

The day came when she met her boyfriend's mother, and they were able to talk.

Deborah Feldman asked, "How are you different? How is it that you were raised by these people and you're not this way?" She replied, "My parents were racists until their dying day. But you have to understand that I was part of a generation that wanted nothing to do with that." Then there was silence. She looked sad and when asked what was wrong replied, "You're the first Jew I ever met. I never had to think about what my parents had done or what kind of impact their actions had on the lives of others, but now that you're here I have to think about that."

Deborah Feldman replied, "No, that's not why I'm here, that's not what I want. I want to let go of all that. I just want my life to be filled with love and forgiveness."

Then her boyfriend's mother said, "It's easy for the victims to say they forgive. The guilty cannot forgive themselves."<sup>1</sup>

What do you do with that? I look at the cruelty and the heartache that we pour out on each other and how it keeps building and building to where no one is guilty, it's always someone else and so we have Israeli teenagers dying and Palestinian teenagers dying, and the madness keeps going. We have people beating each other up in our own homes here in this country. We're the envy of the world with our standard of living and yet we kill each other at a scandalous rate and respond by building more prisons, and if someone

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Feldman, "I Need to Talk About Anne Frank" The Moth: True Stories Told Live, July 1, 2014. <http://themoth.org/stories>

suggests there's something wrong with that, we question their patriotism.

"It's easy for the victims to say they forgive. The guilty cannot forgive themselves."

There's a reason why mental illness and addiction are at epidemic proportions, but we don't talk about either of them except in whispers. Instead, we think of them as character flaws and tell people to 'cheer up' or 'just say no' and then blame them when they don't.

There's a reason why we keep pushing, struggling and trying, all the while wearing our constant activity as badges of honor, and there's a reason why we've allowed our faith to dwindle down to a religion that we use to justify our selfish behavior.

And maybe we never stop to wonder why it's never enough because; like Jacob, we're afraid we'll learn that the problem is not out there but rather in here.

Left unattended, this is where families fracture and relationships crumble, and generations have to deal with the fallout. When God's in it, life happens.

God told Jacob to go home, but there was no going home without dealing with his demons. And so God broke him.

The greatest opportunity of your life could very well be when you are broken. Sometimes God has to break a person before God can use that person. Otherwise lives don't change because we refuse to change.

Jacob had gotten this far by his wits, his craftiness, his deceit, and it paid him well. He lied to his own family, cheating his brother out of something precious. He milked his mother's favoritism for all it was worth, capitalized on his father's increasing age, and went on to a contest with his uncle to see who could pull off the greatest con.

Jacob had to wrestle all night, and when even that wasn't enough, he was struck at one of the strongest places in the human body. He had done horrible damage, and now it was time to deal with it.

Listen to this, friends. Sometimes God has to meet you as an enemy and force you to deal with a hard reality before authentic healing can happen.

If you have never struggled, doubted, or been afraid of some aspects of what God requires of you, then you've been deceiving yourself. If you have never felt personally challenged at the level of your attitudes, opinions or behavior because of the faith you proclaim, you haven't been paying attention.

Sometimes the deepest blessings of God result in a limp of some kind, a permanent reminder if you will. Hopefully Jacob wore it as a badge of honor, and you will with yours, in whatever form it may take.

And when you deal with life at this level, sometimes you find welling up from somewhere deep inside where words are not enough, the reality of Romans 8:26

***In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.***  
(Romans 8:26, TNIV)