

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 August 10, 2008
 08.10 One Condition for Entry

Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31 (*Old Testament lection for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost*)
 For further background read Genesis 25:19-33:17.

Who are we? Why are we here?

John & Charles Wesley declared there was only one condition for admission to the Methodist Societies they helped to found: “*a desire to flee from the wrath to come & to be saved from their sins.*” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004, page 48*) In the story of Jacob we see a man consistently fleeing from wrath. But not every flight from wrath is a flight from “the wrath to come” & not every deliverance is a deliverance from “sin.” There is a moment for Jacob—one night, if you will—when everything changes & that condition is met.

Jacob is a scoundrel. We know it from the moment he enters this world holding onto his older brother’s heel. Esau has the birthright. Jacob has the name—the name that means “the one who takes by the heel, the one who supplants”... the one who trips us up, *the trickster*. How’s that for a name? How’s that for molding a child’s character? Your name is “Jacob”—& we will never fully trust you.

Yes, Esau has the birthright... but not for long. Jacob takes advantage of his brother’s trusting & impulsive nature, takes advantage of his hunger & fatigue, & purchases his birthright for a crust of bread & some lentil stew. Still, Esau has his father’s favor... until Jacob, at his mother’s insistence, disguises himself, lies to his father, & steals the blessing away. Suddenly Esau is ready to kill... & Jacob finds himself fleeing from his brother’s wrath. It is not, however, a flight from the wrath to come. Jacob does not yet understand. He will... but it will take a while.

Jacob flees to his uncle Laban who is a trickster in his own right. He hires Jacob to tend his flocks for seven years in exchange for the hand of his daughter Rachel. But on their wedding night he switches brides on Jacob, then compels him to work another seven years for Rachel’s hand. After those fourteen years Laban persuades him to stay another six but repeatedly changes his wages in an attempt to defraud him. Through a little trickery of his own, however—some might call it “magic”—Jacob gains the upper hand & the best of the flocks for himself.

Now Laban is unhappy... & Jacob finds himself fleeing again, this time from Laban’s wrath. It is not a flight from the wrath to come. Jacob still doesn’t get it. But he will... & soon.

Jacob is caught between a rock & a hard place. There is nowhere left to run. He’s made peace with Laban, but it’s a fragile peace. He cannot go back. At the same time he fears going forward. His brother is out there, the same brother who has vowed to kill him, & he’s coming to meet him with an army of 400 men.

Driven by fear, Jacob still looks for a way out. He divides all who are with him into two companies, hoping that if one is destroyed the other might survive. He sends five gifts on ahead in an attempt to appease his brother—flocks & herds of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, & donkeys. He takes everything & everyone with him across the Jabbok river & then leaves them there to face Esau alone as he crosses back over to the other side. He still flees... but it is not a flight from the wrath to come. He does not understand... not quite yet.

On the other side of the river Jabbok he spends the night. This is the night upon which his entire world, the whole of his life, will turn.

A man comes to him. A stranger, an angel, his conscience? ... we're never quite sure. But Jacob knows... & because of what he knows, because of what he is absolutely sure, he won't let go. They wrestle the entire night. Jacob cannot win. It's not even remotely possible. But he won't give up. The stranger touches Jacob's hip & wounds him. Still, he won't let go. The sun is about to rise & both Jacob & this stranger know that it means certain death for him... no one can see this face & live. Yet he holds on for all he's worth & then some. He will not let go until he has received a blessing from the One from whom he desires it most.

And he receives it. A new name. A new identity. Israel—the one who strives with God, the one who no longer holds on to the heel to trip others up but, rather, the one who holds on to God, who never gives up no matter the consequences.

In the morning he crosses over the river. He divides his family & belongings into groups, Bilhah & Zilpah with their children first, followed by Leah with hers, followed at last by his beloved Rachel & Joseph. But he goes on ahead, bowing down on the ground seven times as he approaches his brother, vulnerable, exposed, with no more defense, not even a pretense or attempt. No more running away.

This is the morning he comes to understand. This is the day he flees from the wrath to come. He's spent his entire life trying to escape all the wrath that has been following him. But the wrath to come is not one that pursues from behind; it's one that meets us out there. It lies ahead of us. And the only way to flee it is to meet it.

John & Charles Wesley declared that there was only one condition for admission to the Methodist Societies they helped to found: “*a desire to flee from the wrath to come & to be saved from their sins.*” As Jacob is received by his brother Esau, expecting—no, deserving—all the wrath in the world, he finds instead mercy, love & grace. He is delivered from all his sins through his brother's grace as no running away could ever accomplish.

And what does Jacob say as his brother lifts him from the dust? “...to see your face is like seeing the face of God...” Jacob would know. Jacob has seen the face.

It is a fearsome grace. To live with it too close for too long is difficult to say the least. It is hard for us to trust so deeply for long, much more for ever. Jacob will lie to his brother. He won't go to live with him but will move to keep some distance between them. Still, to trust in such grace is to be desired, to be hoped for, to hold on to, to grow in to.

Which brings us back to those first two questions: Who are we? Why are we here?

I do not believe that we are here because our friends are here or the people are so nice. I do not believe it is because the preaching is inspired & the music is uplifting. I do not believe it is because this hour we spend together is fun & entertaining—that it's “*what's happening*” in our community on a Sunday morning—& that the food before, during & after the service is going to be good. Each of those serve rather as excuses to stay (or be driven) away. This is especially true when those things are missing. But it also tends to be true when they are present. If those are the reasons we come, then why bother? We could just as easily be at the lake.

No, I believe that we are here because we are desperately seeking something the world cannot offer. We desperately want to see God's face, to draw nearer to God's heart today than we were yesterday, & nearer tomorrow than we are today. In a word, we want to be healed.

And we don't want to be passive about it. We don't just want to keep on hearing the gospel message that “we are saved by grace through faith & not by works lest anyone should boast.” (I've noticed that I preach that message a lot. I think it's because, more than anything else in the gospel, I fear that grace is what we just don't get—that it's not merely something we receive from God but even more how God wants us to live with one another. Jesus calls it love.

But we use that word so casually anymore. "Grace," for me, restores some of the richness I fear has been lost. That having been said...) If receiving salvation is all there is, again we might ask, "Why bother?" We can just as easily be saved by grace through faith out on a boat.

No, we want to know what we can do. We want to know how, not to be saved but to hold on, to grow ever closer to God & to become more Christ-like in all our ways. We begin by fleeing from the wrath to come & receiving the gift of salvation. We begin by facing our fear of God & all the consequences of our sinfulness without pretense or excuse. We begin with the gift. We do not end there.

John Wesley established three General Rules for those who would continue in the Methodist Societies. He then outlined the various means of grace by which we might grow into them—& through them grow closer to God & to one another in the Body of Christ. Over the course of the next several weeks we will both learn & practice these rules & means of grace. In order to keep all of the churches in our parish together in this series & to make it more accessible to guests & others, I intend to do something I haven't done in a long time. The sermons in this series will be typed out in manuscript form & made available on our website. You will be able to read those you miss, review those you want to revisit, & print out any you want to hold onto. Just go to www.umcWASHINGTON.org.

In the meantime, hold on to God for all you are worth—and then some—for meeting God's wrath is the only way to flee it & to find mercy & grace, the salvation from all our sins. In every circumstance let us ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" No, we won't always get the answers right, but simply asking the question & acting on those answers as best we can will help us to grow in the Spirit of God every day.