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Tabor Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2020

Genesis 29:15-28
Karma
Zoom Worship

In reading about Jacob again this week, a word came to mind - **karma**. Jacob deceived his father and brother, and then gets deceived himself. There's a certain satisfaction in the concept of karma, as it relates to other people:).

What goes around comes around. But if karma is true, we could be in real trouble. What's our national karma with relationship to past sins? What's our world karma when it comes to the environment?

Jesus himself says, "*The measure you give is the measure you get.*"¹ He also said, "*A good tree will bear good fruit and a bad tree will bear bad fruit*"². He said, "*If you show mercy, mercy will be shown to you.*"³

Jacob, who had been a trickster, gets tricked. Let's go over the story again, to bring us up to speed:

First, Jacob deceived both his brother and his father in order to get an edge over his twin brother Esau. His mom was in on this trickery, and urged him to go from Beersheba to Haran to flee from Esau's rage. During that trip he settles for the night to sleep on a rock-pillow and has a dream, of a ladder, and God gives him promises — promises about land and children and blessing, not only to him but to the world through his family.

We pick up the story today in Haran as Jacob gets involved with his mom's side of the family. He goes to work for his uncle Laban, who puts him to work out at pasture.

Jacob works seven years for Laban in exchange for getting to marry Laban's daughter Rachel. That's the deal. But Laban sneaks his other daughter Leah in at the last minute, at the wedding, and Jacob ends up

¹ Luke 6:38

² Matthew 7:17-18

³ Matthew 5:7, Luke 6:37

marrying not the one he wants but the one Laban wants him to marry. Now it is Jacob who is deceived.

Karma makes sense; what you put in you get back. Just like we don't get our diploma without passing the tests and we don't make friends by being odious and selfish.

We want to think in a positive sense that if we do good, it will be returned to us in some way. Since I'm not a Hindu or Buddhist I have no business unpacking the meaning of karma, but what I understand of it is this - doing good is its own reward. It's not in order to get something out of it. That's where Christian can go astray, in making behavior relate to rewards and punishments in the future.

A basic definition of Karma says good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and future suffering. There is Scriptural support for this, in Proverbs, for example.

But Scripture, including the Gospel, also foregrounds grace. Jesus gets at this when he tells parables. The wayward son, in the end, gets welcomed back, no questions asked. The other son, who does everything right, isn't pleased, is he? What about karma!?

Jacob has no right getting a blessing from God. He didn't deserve it — either by his behavior or the customs of the day. Both his intentions and his deeds weren't honorable. But God made promises to him anyway. Jacob did pay, there was a quality to his life that reflected bad intent contributing to bad outcome. But overall, grace wins the day.

When the time is right, the story turns from hardship to blessing. The promises of God were never thwarted, no amount of human error or deception would keep God from blessing the world by blessing Jacob.

That means by extension that we are promised blessing; we are grafted on to these stories, as Paul would say, to receive them, learn from them, and see ourselves as more than ourselves, as part of a broader plan, a bigger picture. To be a blessing. If that becomes the purpose of our lives, it is much easier to do good, to create good karma.

Jacob lived life making transactions, or violating them for his own gain. He even tried to bargain with God after God gives him promises - Jacob says to God, *if you grant me these blessings then I will give you a tenth of what I have*. Jacob was operating with an if/then mentality. I'll be good, if.....I'd do good, if.....I get good karma!

But with God we don't come to the negotiating table and say I'll give this if you give that. No, spiritually speaking, we come to the table after realizing God has been there all along, to bless us, in order that the world be blessed.

Ironically, as Jacob's story unfolds, he eventually makes his way back home and finds that the formally vengeful Esau welcomes him with warmth and forgiveness.

Imagine that, the one who was duped, taken for the hairy fool, NOT included in the line of patriarchs, demonstrates what Jesus Christ was trying so hard to teach, and reflect through his life and death - **grace**. Esau wipes the slate clean and renders the enmity between brothers over.

Esau, the rejected one, is our spiritual ancestor just as much as Jacob. Hagar and Ishmael, too, the banished ones. Ishmael would go on to produce the lines that would become our modern-day Muslims. Look at the enmity between Abraham's offspring happening to this very day. Look at the enmity in *our* land. When we are **supposed** to be a blessing! We use dehumanizing language and images to demean those who aren't on our side. What good can come from all this enmity? A few days ago a pastor I know in the Northeast posted on social media a demeaning image of a New York congresswoman next to a picture of a donkey.

Can you imagine John Lewis, or Ronald Reagan, calling a congresswoman an expletive?

When we demean others, we become what killed our Jesus. The cross represents what we do to what we hate. It is the projection of our fears. It is finding a scapegoat. It is brother against brother. The cross shows that God is not violent, we are.

In our book group this week I mentioned how Catholic churches display Jesus ON the cross, nailed to the cross, in all its horror, while Protestant

churches display an empty cross, because we want to lift up the rest of the story, the empty cross. But it is time for us as Protestants to look at the ugliness of what causes us to hurt, to mock, to reject any child of God. To see that it is real, and has consequences. Jesus did suffer and die, and continues to suffer, as he waits for all God's children, of all the tribes, to live in peace. Remember when Jesus wept for Jerusalem? He wept for its absence of peace.

Esau, the angry brother, transformed his rage. And Jacob, for his part, accepted his brother's grace. Those who accept grace are those who accept that they are flawed, or wrong, or in need. Jesus invites us to accept his grace. To receive it is to climb down from our perch of feigned superiority; or the alternative, to receive his grace is to climb up from a place of shame or unworthiness.

When we accept grace, we will surely meet the Christ, who has not been with the proud and mighty, but with the lost, grieving, guilty and shamed. Meaning, all of us. Amen.

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace;
 be of good courage;
 hold fast to that which is good;
 return to no one evil for evil; ***I Cor. 16:13.***
 strengthen the faint hearted; ***II Tim. 2:1.***
 support the weak; ***Eph. 6:10.***
 help the afflicted; ***I Thess. 5:13-22.***
 honor all people; ***I Peter 2:17.***
 love and serve the Lord;
 rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**