

**July 23, 2023**

**Pollocksville Presbyterian Church**

**Genesis 28: 10-19**

**Matthew: 13:24-30, 36-43**

**“Jacob – An Unlikely Candidate”**

How often have we heard of someone, or maybe even have known someone, who was a “so-so” person, or maybe even what we would call a “low achiever”? It could be that person you are thinking of, later has a transformative experience and becomes someone truly to be admired, and even a leader.

I am sure we can all think of examples in history or maybe even in our own families. Often these are people who seem to be just drifting through life with no sense of purpose and with little merit of achievement. And then they have an experience, or a particularly difficult period and they emerge with a new intensity, and live life with greater determination. Obviously, the United States armed forces know of this phenomenon: It is called Boot Camp! Not far from here at Parris Island, SC, young people from all walks of life are transformed into United States Marines.

Ulysses S. Grant was an unimpressive student at West Point Military Academy. Even his classmate, William Tecumseh Sherman, said of Grant, “A more unpromising boy never entered the Military Academy. Let this be a lesson to all of us. Looks are deceiving.” Within a few years after the Academy, Grant resigned his commission and left the army. At one point, married, with four children, he scraped by selling firewood on the streetcorners of Saint Louis, Missouri. Hardly the background of a person who later commanded the Union forces, accepted General Robert E. Lee’s surrender, effectively ending the Civil War, and then served two terms as President of the United States.

Most people here remember the entertainer, Carol Burnett. Well, she was not always the happy go lucky, goofy entertainer we have come to love. Her parents' unhappy marriage ended in divorce. She moved with her mother to Hollywood, California. She enrolled, and later dropped out of UCLA, and worked odd jobs and a few acting gigs as became available. She wanted to be a writer, and worked as a theatre usher and as a hat check girl. Finally, as often happens in Hollywood, chance encounters led to more opportunities. Lucille Ball became her friend and mentor. (Who would not want to be in the company of those two women?) 🤔

Well, of course, Carol Burnett, now age 90, went on to be one of the most successful TV personalities with her *Carol Burnett Show*. Even now, most of us get a chuckle just thinking about the skits of Carol, Harvey Korman, and Tim Conway.

Well today's Old Testament story is about Jacob, son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham. Jacob, you will recall, was a twin. Born with Esau to his mother, Rebekah, and father Isaac. Jacob was second-born, reportedly delivered while grasping the heel of his brother Esau. And he remained a "grasper."

In those times the first-born son was the heir and received his birthright. Remember, momma Rebekah favored Jacob, and so together they concocted a scheme for Jacob to cheat Esau out of his birthright. Then Jacob, with Rebecca's help, tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau.

Now, as we pick up the story from this morning's Scripture selection, Jacob is on the lam! Esau has discovered the deception and intends to kill Jacob if he can get his hands on him. Their mother, Rebecca, sends Jacob to stay with her uncle Laban back in the old country until things settle down. While there, he is expected to find a wife for himself. So it is on this journey that Jacob stops for the night to rest. In the midst of all this turmoil in his life, Jacob has the most fabulous dream of his life – a life-changing event.

Well as so often is the case, God waits to reveal himself to Jacob until he has him right where he wants him. A chilly night in the desert, all alone, without Momma Rebekah to provide for him or take his side, God chooses to break through Jacob's self-involvement with the vision of the staircase or ladder to heaven. Upon awakening God renews the promise of the covenant made previously with Abraham. Jacob responds with his earliest statement of faithfulness and dedication to God. Jacob will mature to be a capable keeper of the Covenant. The Dream of Jacob's Ladder is a new beginning. In his excited awakening, Jacob erects an altar and calls the place, Bethel, meaning "House of God."

Jacob goes on to be the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. In fact, the Scripture writers use the names Jacob, and Israel almost interchangeably. Later in Genesis we will read the story of Old Testament Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, who saves his people from starvation when he serves as the Prime Minister of Egypt. Indeed, it is from Jacob's family that the Nation of Israel springs. It is through God's renewed Covenant with Jacob that Christians point to when God says to Jacob, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." The Gospel writer, Matthew, traces the lineage of Jesus, all the way back through Jacob, to his grandfather, Abraham in Chapter 1.

If you read forward in Genesis, you will see that Jacob does not stop being Jacob, even though he confirms the Covenant with God. You will read how he meets his equal as a “wheeler-dealer” in his future father-in-law, Laban. You will read how Laban switched out Jacob’s bride Rachel for Leah, the older sister. How Laban exacted 14 years of service out of Jacob in exchange for his two daughters. But how Jacob turns the tables on Laban in herd management is an early lesson in genetics. It is a fascinating story!

No, Jacob did not stop being Jacob. But going forward he will grow into the role of the Patriarch. Just like we each grow into the roles and plans God has for us. Our realizations may come in an instant or in a dream or in a singular conversation. Our actualization of our partnership with God takes a lifetime. We live into God’s promises and plans for us!

So, parents and grandparents of those C+ students, or the under-achieving child, take heart! God has already demonstrated that he hears our prayers! Understand the meaning of the little desktop sign which reads, “Please be patient with me. God is not finished with me yet!”

Likewise, our New Testament lesson from Matthew has more than one message. Jesus is teaching the crowds by the lake, and climbs into the boat to create a little space between the teacher and the listeners. The custom at that time was to teach while seated, so you can imagine Jesus seated in the boat and the crowds seated on the hillside overlooking the lake. A house is mentioned in this chapter which Jesus goes into and out of. We can presume he was staying there with his Disciples. We are not told whose home it was.

As we read the Scriptures, we expect these types of events happened fairly frequently during the three years of Jesus' ministry. Because of his teaching, and his healing, and the public miracles, crowds sought Jesus out. Indeed, it was sometime difficult for Jesus to get away from the crowds. Still, throughout his ministry there is an intentionality about his actions and his words. Jesus did not do things "by accident."

Jesus appears to be intentional about teaching his closest Disciples through parables. The Gospel of John contains no parables. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain a version of the parable of the Sower. But only Matthew's Gospel included this parable of the Wheat and the Tares, as it came to be known.

In this account Jesus is acknowledging the existence of evil, or separation from God, represented by the tares, or weeds, and those who planted them. And yes, he teaches, for a period the Righteous will have to put up with evil in their midst. But in due time, when the harvest comes, the weeds will be pulled up and burned, while the wheat will be gathered in and safely stored in the barns.

To his closest Disciples he is saying, "There is a time of judgement and accountability coming. According to the Father's timetable, the righteous will be protected and the evil ones will meet their demise. It is a common theme in Matthew's Gospel, that one day there will be an accounting of how each person has lived their life. Did they live their days to Glorify their creator? Did they use their energies and abilities to assist those less fortunate? Of did they live their days attending to their own self-centered needs, even if that meant sometimes taking advantage of those less fortunate. Did they seek self-promotion at the expense of others?"

This time, after the crowds had disbursed, Jesus took time to explain this parable to the Disciples, not something he always did. Clearly his purpose was to set an expectation for them about what the Kingdom of Heaven would be like. Consistently, throughout his teaching he reinforced the character traits of justice, mercy, and benevolence. These would be the hallmarks of the coming Kingdom. Followers of Christ were expected to heed his teaching and put his instructions into practice.

Well, are lessons today are quite a juxtaposition. We have Jacob's wonderous account of his dream and vision of God. Clearly the account must have come directly from him. And with that dream we have Jacob now centering his life on living into the Covenant with God. Without this event, perhaps the Covenant is forgotten, and we never hear of Jacob and these wonderful Old Testament accounts. So, in a sense, this account is the story of a renewed beginning.

And we have Jesus, speaking of endings, and final accountings. And telling the Disciples, and telling us today, that our lives have purpose, and that our decisions and choices do have consequences. So, Jesus, through a parable of Wheat and Tares, and by explanation, is telling us what the last chapter of our journey looks like. He is revealing the ending.

**A Renewed Beginning and a Revealed Ending. To God Be the Glory. AMEN**