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Genesis 25:19-24

Take Hold

Have you ever seen one of these? Kids play with them. If you are sitting in the back it might be hard to see, it's in the shape of a hand, and it has a distinctive surface; it is highly adhesive. I could possibly use it to nab a bulletin from one of the acolytes.

I bring this in because of a person we meet in today's reading from Genesis, a character who will be the focus of the Old Testament readings for several weeks. Last Sunday we heard about his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, we heard about how they met, how it was love at first sight and how they found comfort in one another, after sadness. Today we learn that there was sadness after they met, too, they wanted children, but couldn't conceive, for a long, long time. Finally, after long years and anxious prayers, finally, after twenty long years Rebekah became pregnant, and it was a hard pregnancy. Strong and fearless Rebekah felt so awful it drove her to her knees, "If I've got to feel like this, why do I live?" she asked God. She said that even before she went into labor. Rebekah was carrying twins, which may have explained why it felt like such a struggle inside, like a fight, like a wrestling match going on in her womb. And it was. Rebekah gave birth to twin boys, who were far from identical. Rebekah's firstborn was hairy and red, so they called him Rusty, or in Hebrew, Esau. Fast on Esau's heels came his younger brother, who was wrestling his way through the birth canal. The seconds-younger second son was born holding on to his older brother's foot. So they called him Sticky Fingers.

Actually, they called him Jacob, which in Hebrew sounds like the Hebrew word for heel. It's a play on words in another language, but it works in English, too, because Jacob was something of a heel, someone who is not very admirable, someone who does questionable things for their own benefit. That sounds a lot like Jacob, who was born grabbing for the firstborn's place, grabbing for the firstborn's birthright and blessing. Jacob didn't get them in the delivery room, but later he did.

In today's reading, we hear how Jacob gets Esau's birthright. Esau, who grows up to be an avid outdoorsman, has been out working up an appetite when he comes home to find Jacob, who is inside cooking. Jacob is the more cultivated, and cultured, and calculating. A famished Esau makes a flippant offer: he's so hungry he'll trade his birthright for a bowl of red stew, lentil stew. Which is crazy, because lentils? Maybe filet mignon, but lentils? Which is crazy, because a birthright is the family inheritance—the vastly larger portion of it that goes to the firstborn. Esau doesn't care about that, though. Esau is willing to let his birthright fall from his fingers for a bowl of beans. And Jacob makes sure to make the deal official, makes Esau swear to it. A few verses later Jacob will also get Esau's firstborn blessing, this time with duplicitous help from Rebekah. Whether she's a bad mother, whether Esau is a dolt, Jacob seems all too ready to take something that is not his. Jacob doesn't hesitate, he shows no restraint. He takes and he takes and he takes and he just keeps winning. (I stole that from Hamilton.) Jacob has sticky fingers, which is just a polite way of describing someone with a penchant for stealing.

This is our protagonist?! This is the character we'll be hearing about for the next several weeks? This is the guy who'll become the father of twelve sons, who'll become twelve tribes, who'll become the great nation that God promised to Abraham? This heel of guy is our hero?

Jacob, like so many other people in the Bible, is complicated. These are difficult people, these patriarchs and matriarchs of faith, these are difficult people, our parents. (I may not be just speaking Biblically.) Like life, biblical characters are difficult—which also makes them

believable. Biblical characters are flawed. If we don't acknowledge that, we are not being honest. And, I think, when we acknowledge that, it forces us to think about the Bible, about Christian faith, in difficult ways, in honest ways, in deeply true ways.

If Jacob is less than admirable, why does he get such a focus? I think the questionable character of Jacob—at its most questionable, the very characteristic that gives him his name—underlines something that faithful people sometimes miss. Maybe it's especially missed by faithful people who are Lutheran. Some might even call it a flaw in Lutheran theology. Here's what it is: As Martin Luther emphasized, five hundred years ago, Christian faith is all about grace: Grace comes first. God's gift of love and forgiveness is absolutely free, not something that we can earn or do anything to deserve. God just gives it to us: justification. There is now no condemnation, as St. Paul says. "Here it is," God says, "It's yours. You are accepted. You are loved. Here."

But then what? This, some say, is where Lutheran theology needs work. A knee-jerk Lutheran response is: "But it's not about works!" And it's not. God's grace comes to us, apart from works, but it doesn't end there—as Grandfather Martin, as Papa Paul, would most certainly agree. You have been given this great gift from God, what are you going to do with it? Are you going to just let it drop from your hands? By no means! A graced life does not mean doing nothing. On the contrary, faith is active and busy, gets into tussles: "Fight the good fight of faith," the Bible says, "Fight the good fight of faith, take hold of the eternal salvation to which you are called." Take hold of it, grab it, by God! By God, the power to be a new person has been put in your hands. Don't let it slip away, take hold of it.

Maybe you saw the story about what happened a week ago at a beach in Florida, late last Saturday afternoon? Lifeguards were gone for the day but the beach was still crowded. Two young boys, two brothers, were out swimming, and they got caught in a rip tide. A woman and her wife were nearby on boogie boards, they tried to help the boys, but then they both got caught in the current. Some other swimmers barely managed to help get one of the women to shore, but her wife was still out there struggling with the two brothers, and then they were joined by the boys' frantic parents, and grandmother, and others, now nine people all trying desperately to stay above water. The police had arrived at the beach, but were waiting for a boat. Meanwhile the swimmers were becoming more exhausted every moment. And then a person on the beach said. "We can make a chain." Some said, "No way, we'll get swept out too," but others joined hands. The woman from the boogie board lay panting on the beach, "I couldn't get back in," she said, "My lungs were full of water and I couldn't breathe. Everybody that would come by me, I would holler at them that my wife was out there, kids were out there, that they had to join the chain." They did: people on the beach, people who were scared, people who had never met before. Eventually the chain grew to around eighty people, reaching nearly 70 yards out, a chain of strangers. A witness said "It was pretty amazing ... different races, different genders, different ages; everybody got together to help." They grabbed one another's hands, and held on tight. And they brought the drowning swimmers in. They saved them.

Those are the sticky hands of faith, hands that take hold, different hands, ordinary hands, flawed hands, every one of them attached to a hero. Like Jacob, a hero and heel, a man who kept grabbing, kept wrestling, until, finally, he finds himself wrestling with God. And doesn't let go. Jacob doesn't let go until he gets a blessing and a new name, Israel, which means, the one who strives with God. May we also so strive, so grab, so take hold of grace.