

**Sermon Jacob, Genesis 28: 10-19, 22 July 17, 2011, Salem United Church, Denver, CO**

**Stories are important in our lives. They become part of the foundation on which we are able to learn. In fact, Parker Palmer, a famed educator, teacher, spiritual leader, writer and a man who experienced depression and mental health issues, says in his book “A life Undivided” that one of best ways for us to learn is from stories.**

**But in order for us to learn, we have to listen and that is the difficult part for most people. We love to talk, to hear ourselves talk. It is in being silent, in listening that we hear the movement of God in lives. Last Tuesday, in the Bible discussion, we listened to each other as stories were shared on the movement of mystery in people’s lives. There wasn’t any attempt to try to analyze or interpret, only the welcoming experience of silence as we all listen to stories of God in our lives.**

**Perhaps it is only with age that we can look back, or perhaps it is with wisdom, but I do know that is with compassion and an openness to God’s timing and movement, that our story can be heard. There are many stories here at Salem that can be shared. Lori Carroll in the Wednesday class on “Practicing Resurrection” encourages us to reflect on experiences of worship, experiences and history of relationships, of grace and forgiveness, and if we feel the safety and trust, to share. People come to me and share their stories of hurt, joy, confusion, bewilderment, and anguish. This is holy time for me; it is a sacred time and place, for people are learning to trust. People are moving to wholeness and do not want to be divided.**

**Stories are ways for us to enter into the larger story of God’s grace and love. Even stories like Little Red Riding Hood, and Humpty Dumpty, children’s stories teach us about relationships and God’s presence and movement. Last week, we learned that ‘nothing is broken beyond repair.’**

**Of course Jesus told stories. They helped people relate to the theme and message of God’s all accepting love of all people. The stories challenged people who wanted to be in control, or who had something that they didn’t want to lose. Some of the parables like the Prodigal Son, or Father, the Lost Coin, and the Good Samaritan remind us of God constantly seeking each of us out, and welcoming us, because of God’s mercy, love and graciousness. The Christian Church has for years been telling the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as a story of God’s love for all people.**

**Still, we try to interpret it according to our understanding, our needs and our formulas for who is acceptable and who is out.**

**The scripture we heard this morning is from the story of Jacob. I like Jacob, not because he is a conniving, crooked man, who looks out for his own interest primarily, but because he is like me and you. Before this scripture Jacob has already cheated his brother, Esau out of his birthright, deceived his blind old man into giving him the birthright blessing meant for his older brother, Esau and is now on his way to stay with relatives because his mother, also a conniving woman, wants him to marry someone in her clan, and well, things have gotten a bit too hot at home.**

**But in spite of all of these cheating, irresponsible, conniving, activities, God sees something valuable. Yes, God sees something valuable where we would see something totally different.**

**God comes to him in a dream, promising to give Jacob many descendants who will be blessed and will occupy the land through which Jacob has been passing. What's more, God promises to be with Jacob. And at this point, at least, God asks for nothing in return.**

**When Jacob awakes, he's perceptive enough to realize that something very important has happened, and that although Jacob hadn't expected it, the Lord really was in that place. And what Jacob does next suggests that he does take things seriously: He sets a stone on end as a pillar of memorial and pours oil on it as an act of worship.**

**He then prays to God, but what comes out of his mouth shows us that the divine visitation has not changed him. He still looks out for himself. We might think that we are doing it for God, or for the church, or for our family or loved ones. He prays: "If God will be with me, and [if God] will keep me in this way that I go, and [if God] will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God ..."**

**Please note: this prayer isn't about what God wants. It is what Jacob wants out of this relationship.**

**This doesn't mean that he shouldn't have prayed in that way. I admire him for doing so. It was honest and it's better to pray what is really in your heart than some pious platitudes. But God heard him.**

**When our prayers are motivated only by what we want, or what we can do, or think needs to be done, instead of by a desire to find what God wants, well, God may even give us what we ask, but it can come at the price of not finding any lasting satisfaction. It is like a child asking for a piece of candy, and once received, continues to ask. It isn't very satisfactory.**

**So what can we take away from all of this? Simply this: Our prayers are to help us, not to help God. They are not to win God over to our side, to push God to do something we want. God already knows what we want. But we are shaped and molded by what we ask of God. Thus we should ask for God's Spirit so that we can cease to be self centered and become a person guided by God's Spirit.**

**If we are to pray honestly, our prayer for the Spirit may have to be one like, "God, I really don't want to turn my life over to you. I want to do my will and not yours. That's who I am but that is not who I am content to be. Please help me to want your Spirit within me."**

**It's a start, you see. A prayer that says to God, "I want what I want but help me to want what you want" is the prayer of a person becoming a person of the Spirit.**

**The story of Jacob is one where God enters in mysteriously and unexpectedly. Isn't that the story of Jesus? All Jacob wanted was a good night's sleep. Jacob's story is our story, God entering in when we least expect it, mysteriously. When we listen to each other's story, listen for the movement of God, and give thanks for the ability to welcome, celebrate, the movement of God in your life, and in someone else. May the Spirit in you recognize the Spirit of Christ in the other. Namaste. Amen**