

Climbing the Right Ladder
Genesis 28:10-19a

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How do you define success? I would like to talk about that today. Robert Raines says, "Success is a moving target. Every time I make my mark, somebody paints the wall," go the lyrics of a country song. Oliver Wendell Holmes at age 90 said, "The secret to my success is that at an early age, I discovered I was not God." Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "To leave the world a bit better, to know that even one life has breathed easier because you lived, that is to have succeeded."

We catch up with our Old Testament hero, Jacob, today about 50 miles from home. Tricky Jake, with a little help from his mother, has successfully stolen his brother's inheritance from their blind father. Now he is running for his life. At this place called Bethel, with a pillow made of stone, Jacob dreams about a ladder stretching all the way from earth to his heavenly home. If you have ever been to church camp, or Bible School, or sung your way through our hymnal, you know about Jacob's ladder.

Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests the ladder represents the distance between "who we are" and "who God intends us to be." If you study the text closely, you will see that Jacob neither constructs the ladder nor climbs it. Therein lies a critical point in our consideration of success.

Jacob has been climbing a ladder all of his life. The problem is, the ladder is one of his own making. Jacob's ladder is a ladder of greed. Grab what you can while you can. Success for Jacob, like for many of us, meant getting the better of the other person before they have a chance to get the best of you. After all, is life not the survival of the fittest?

So what if he lies? The average person lies 13 times a week, according to statistics. Never mind that he cheats. Seventy-five percent of teenagers admit to cheating in school. Who would not run? Are we really guilty unless we get caught?

George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* movies was once asked why Anakin Skywalker became the evil Darth Vader. George Lucas replied, "He cannot let go of things. That makes you greedy. When you are greedy you are on the path to the dark side." Jacob's ladder was a ladder of greed.

Jacob's ladder was a ladder of competition. DO whatever it takes to win. In Jacob's view, somebody had to win and somebody had to lose, and he was going to be a winner. A sign seen at the Olympics said, "You don't win the silver medal, you lose the gold medal." Such is the life of competition. That is the way we like it, and that is the way we live it.

I confess to you, I am not a great tennis fan, but I did get interested in the Williams sisters at the Wimbledon finals. A sports writer in *The Tennessean* said, "It's heartwarming to witness their affection, but something has to change. Great players in tennis and every other sport have always had great rivalries to help elevate their stature to legendary levels. When blood is thicker than baseline shots, it makes for a compelling family bonding study, but not very compelling tennis." The problem with the sisters playing each other is that they don't hate each other. Venus, who lost to Serena, was asked if this would come between them in the years to come. "Not at all! Ten years from now we will both be retired from tennis, but we will still be sisters." Sometimes I wonder if history would be different if Isaac's boys had been more like the Williams sisters?

It was Jacob's ladder all right. He had been climbing it since he was born. It is a ladder of greed. It is a ladder of competition. It is a ladder of isolation. He winds up here, fifty miles from home, by himself and scared. In a Tom Wilson cartoon, *Ziggy* is standing between two big boulders. He is pushing against them with all of his might. On one boulder is printed the word "Rock". On the other boulder is printed "Hard Place". On this night with a stone for a pillow, Jacob is between a rock and a hard place. Someone once said there are two great disappointments in life. One is to not get what you want. The other is to get it and find out it was not worth the effort in the first place.

A young man, who was struggling with a drug habit that eventually took his life, wrote this little poem:

*When you get what you want in your struggle for self
And the world makes you king for a day.
Just go to the mirror and look at yourself
And see what that man has to say.
For it isn't your father or mother or wife
Whose judgment upon you must pass.
The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life
Is the one staring back in the glass.*

Here, alone, Jacob finds himself in ultimate isolation, having been climbing a ladder that was ending nowhere. Maybe you are tired of climbing such ladders. If so, you may be in the very spot to find the wondrous resources of a God who fails us not. If I had been God, I would just let Jacob wallow in it. Thank God I'm not God. God views things totally differently than I. If your ladder climbing has left you out on a limb of isolation, I have good news for you. God does not desert his own. Sure, Jacob missed the mark. Sure, he has not understood his calling. Sure, he has not really grasped the notion of the blessing that is his. In reality, God comes to him anyway. Here the Lord builds a ladder all the way to Jacob. The Bible says, "The Lord stood beside him." The Bible never gets better than this.

When the Lord comes, Jacob moves from achieving to receiving. *And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring;"* (Genesis 28:13-14)

Wait a minute, Jacob. That for which you are grabbing, you already have. Why do you have to grab for that which is already yours? When will we learn? The best gifts in life are free: the beauty of the earth, the air we breathe, the life we live, the sun that shines, the birds that sing. These are just a few of my favorite things. We may earn a living, but you and I, in a reflective moment in church, know that we are given a life. In this moment of introspection, when he runs the limit of his own doing, Jacob is forced back to understand that God had already given him the blessing. Why are you trying to grasp that which is already yours?

One of my favorite children's books is about Stripe, the caterpillar. Stripe burst from his egg and straightway began to eat the leaf on which he was born. Then he ate another leaf and another. Bored by getting bigger, Stripe crawled down the friendly tree in search of something more. But nothing seemed to satisfy. Stripe joined a group of climbers, determined to rise above average caterpillars. He climbed up. He climbed down. He frolicked in the grass with a lady named Yellow. But it was not until Stripe stopped, grew very still and waited in the darkness, that Stripe the caterpillar became a butterfly. I've got news for you. God wants to make something beautiful out of your life. The question is simply this, will you stop long enough for the metamorphosis to take place?

That night, Jacob moved from achieving to receiving. Some of you are tired of climbing. If you want to stop it today, recognize that all I have needed God already has provided. Jacob ran into a ladder that night. It was not Jacob's ladder; it was the Lord's ladder stretching from Heaven to earth. It was a ladder that moved Jacob from achieving to receiving.

It was a ladder that took Jacob from power to presence. The Lord says to Jacob, *"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, *"Surely the Lord is in this place— and I did not know it!"* And he was afraid, and said, *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."* (Genesis 28:15-17)

Maybe for the first time in his life, Jacob met somebody bigger than he is. Maybe the only way to deal with our own narcissism is to come face-to-face with a power that is greater than our own. Listen to what the Lord says to him that lonely night in Bethel.

I am with you. That is compassion.

*I will watch over you. That is protection.
I will bring you back. That is guidance.
I will never leave you or forsake you. That is companionship.*

When Dick Howser resigned as manager of the Kansas City Royals due to brain cancer, his wife Nancy said, "As a child I was brought up to believe that it is not whether or not you won or lost, but how you played the game that mattered. Then in the real world, I learned you had to win to get anywhere and it didn't matter how you did it. But now after what has happened to Dick, I realize the old way is the right way. It really and truly is how you play the game." That night under the stars, Jacob recognizes that it is not by power that I find the grace of God; it is by acknowledging the presence of the One who comes in the night. That night Jacob moved from power to presence.

That night Jacob moved from getting and grabbing, to giving. *Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and 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, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."* (Genesis 28:20-22)

Did you hear about the two men who crashed their private plane on a deserted Pacific island? Both survived the crash. One man immediately surveyed the place to assess their chances of survival. He came back to his friend and said, "There are no inhabitants, no food, and no water here." When he reported the grim news to his friend, the other man leaned back against the wrecked plane, folded his arms and said, "Relax, I make over \$100,000 a week." "But we are stranded on a deserted island with no people, no food and no water," said the first guy. "Don't you realize we are going to die?" "Don't make me say this again," said the friend, "I make over \$100,000 a week. I tithe my income. Trust me, my pastor will find us."

Trust me my friends, when you are stranded in a tough place of your own making, somebody greater than your pastor will find you. The Lord himself will extend the ladder all the way to where you are.

*Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.
I can hear the brush of angels' wings,
I see glory on each face;
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.*

