

Emmanuel Lutheran Church

Lent 3

February 25, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer

Be a daily disciple

—Genesis 28:10-17

Did you hear about the young man who committed fraud to get his family's fortune? There were two brothers in the family, and the report was that the younger brother colluded with the mother to elbow out the older brother from the family fortune. The younger brother and his mother came up with an elaborate scam involving fraud, where the younger brother would somehow pose as his older brother and siphon the family funds all to himself, leaving the older brother penniless at the father's death. What made the whole crime especially reprehensible is that the younger brother also scammed his own father, an elderly man who was disabled because of blindness. The whole scam was working out, but when the older brother finally found out what his younger brother was really up to, the whole family blew apart. The older brother who was getting scammed threatened to kill the younger brother who was doing the scamming. It was a mess. And so this young man who committed fraud to get the family fortune fled the scene and moved away, hoping that a cool down period would soften his brother up so that at some point in the future the younger brother could return home.

This was the situation Jacob found himself in that night he lay down to sleep under the stars, exposed to the elements outside, with a rock for his pillow. Jacob was the young man who committed fraud. Jacob's mother Rebekah helped him do it because she favored her son Jacob over his twin brother Esau. Isaac was the elderly father whose blindness Jacob took advantage of to secure the family inheritance for himself. It was a mess. A real mess. Mostly caused by Jacob's deceit. Scheming to get what he wanted and taking advantage of vulnerable people was a character flaw of Jacob's. At birth, he came out of the womb literally grabbing his twin brother's heel. That's how he got his name. In Hebrew, Jacob means "he grabs onto the heel." "Jacob" was also a Hebrew expression for attacking someone's heel and taking advantage of someone. Unfortunately, as Jacob grew into a young man, he lived up—or I guess it would be better to say he lived down—to his name. And if Jacob was going to be a devoted daily disciple of his Lord, that would have to change.

"Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mk 8). "Jesus said to [all his disciples]: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me'" (Lk 9). What gets in the way of your being a daily disciple of your Lord? What do you notice about yourself that consistently must be denied if you are going to follow your Lord, that must be denied daily if you are going to follow through on what your Lord wants you to be doing? What attitude of yours needs to be adjusted? What thought process must be removed and rewired? What words need to be eliminated and what words should be added to your daily vocabulary? What habit has to be chopped off at the root every time it wants to sprout, and what patterns have to be starved of any food or water, lest they even begin to get the best of you? What activity of your hand or your foot or your eye has to be chopped off right now, so your eye may be the daily lamp of your body that God

says it is, for your feet to walk his ways and your hands to serve him all your days? It doesn't work to notice your character flaws and say, "Well, that's just who I am! Live with it, brother or sister! Live with it, Mom or Dad! That's just who I am! Live with it, Lord!" That's not denying yourself. That is defending your sinful self. That's telling everybody else, "You need to adjust to my poor attitude. You need to not be offended by the knives that come out of my mouth. You need to ignore my destructive habits, even when they help to destroy your life, too." Does that sound like being a disciple to you? A person who daily learns from Jesus and daily follows behind Jesus?

I imagine Jacob felt bad about what he had done. How could he not? Even though his father Isaac did speak to him after the fraud and pronounced a blessing on him, essentially forgiving him, it still must have stung to think about what he had done to take advantage of his own elderly father. As for his brother Esau, well, the thought of having to face him again filled Jacob with terror for the next two decades of his life. And even though Jacob remained his mother Rebekah's favorite, it was small consolation he had joined with her to do things their way, not God's way. So it was a lonely, anxious, humbled Jacob who left his home to travel hundreds of miles north to his uncle's place to find a wife and start a new life there. *When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."* And now here they come, the promises of pure grace which the LORD had also made to Jacob's grandpa Abraham and Jacob's dad, Isaac. A great nation. A land for those people to live in. A Savior who would come from that people and from that land to bring blessing and forgiveness to the world. *"I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."* The LORD forgave Jacob all his sin for the sake of the Savior whom the LORD was promising again to send. As Jacob began the first day of his life away from home, he could live with the certainty that his past was forgiven.

So can you. You may, you can, and you should live with the certainty that your past has been forgiven. You are one of all the peoples on earth who have been blessed through Jacob and his most special descendant, namely, Jesus Christ. I am so glad that Romans chapter 5 was paired with today's other lessons on discipleship because it is always a wonderful, comforting reminder that God kept the promises he made to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, to his people, and ultimately, to us, too. Romans 5 is a reminder of what we believe as daily disciples of our Lord. "Justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand...At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Dear daily disciple, your past is forgiven. You are at peace with God, not because of your present discipleship, not because of your future discipleship, but because Christ died for you. He died for your character flaws and suffered all that they rightly deserve. So the Lord does not hold your sins against you. He holds no guilt to your name. You stand in God's grace today, right now. You stand in God's grace every day, by faith. What greater joy and happiness could there be than to be a daily disciple of a God like your God?

With a forgiven past, Jacob had many days of discipleship still ahead of him. As he lay down under the night sky, he had no idea how many days of discipleship were yet to be nor what the coming days of discipleship would bring. But the Lord knew. Jacob would never again see his mother on this earth. His mother's brother Laban would turn out to be twice the trickster Jacob had once been, and he would create a very difficult existence for Jacob. Laban would throw both of his daughters at Jacob, instead of just the one whom Jacob really wanted, plus the two daughters would add two more maidservants into the mix, causing jealousies and rivalries that dominated Jacob's domestic life. Jacob would be given the responsibility of being a father to twelve sons and at least one daughter. He would work for Laban for twenty years, which he would later describe in this way: "The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes." Jacob would have to face his brother Esau again. Ten of Jacob's sons would sell their own brother, Joseph, out of spite and then tell their father his favorite son was dead. All that and more was waiting for Jacob in his days of discipleship. But mercifully, the Lord didn't tell Jacob about all that ahead of time. Jacob would have to walk through each day on its own.

But he would not go alone. The Lord promised to be with him. Always. Here were the Lord's final words in the dream he gave Jacob: *"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* See how the Lord was working to turn Jacob into a devoted daily disciple of his? Jacob's flaw was that he liked to rely on himself, to the point of scheming and deceiving to get what he wanted. Granted, the things he wanted were highly desirable gifts from God, the rights of the firstborn that had been promised to him before birth, even though he was the younger of the twins. But instead of trusting the Lord's promises to bring these things to him, he overreached and overstepped the bounds of decency. From now on, he would need to learn to trust in the Lord with all his heart and lean not on his own understanding. So the Lord made specific promises to Jacob for him to trust.

I don't know what tomorrow's discipleship is going to mean for me tomorrow, or a year from now, or a decade from now, should the Lord grant me that time to serve him in this life. You don't know what is going to happen in your life that you will need to deal with as a Christian disciple. None of us knows these things. Mercifully, the Lord does not reveal these things to us ahead of time. We will need to walk into them on that day. Or we are currently walking in them right now today. Or we are still today having to deal with the effects of yesterday. The Lord has not promised us an easy life as his disciples. In fact, by telling us, "Take up your cross daily and follow me," he is teaching us this life will bring many difficulties that will call for self-denial, patient endurance, the willingness to make sacrifices that are pleasing to God. We are called upon to trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not upon our own understanding, our own imagination, our own ways of getting what we want. We are not asked to live yesterday over again. We cannot live tomorrow today. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Christ lives. We do too.

It is important for us to understand how the Lord deals with us. The same way he dealt with Jacob. Instead of telling us the details of our future, he makes promise about the future for us to trust today. Except for the promise that he would bring Jacob back to the land he was sleeping on, the other personal promises the Lord made to Jacob apply equally to us. They are promises God repeats elsewhere in his Word. *"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...I will not leave you*

until I have done what I have promised you.” “I will give you your daily bread. I will provide for you and protect you today. Today you have redemption through Jesus’ blood, the forgiveness of sins, and your final redemption will come when I raise you up at the last day. Every day I will make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. *I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*” And that doesn’t mean he’s leaving us after he has kept his promises. It just means he is going to do everything he said he would.

Be a daily disciple. Your past is forgiven. Your future is promised. You are following Christ today. Amen.