

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
26 September 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Dreaming of a Table Where We Don’t Have to Fight for Seats”

Third sermon in the 5-week series: *A Place at the Table*

Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

New Revised Standard Version

Let’s start with the dream. That is, let’s begin at the *end* of our text for today – Jacob waking from his sleep and declaring, “*Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!*” (Genesis 28:16).

Perhaps you’ve had a moment in your life where you have experienced the presence of the Divine so strongly, so palpably, that you *knew* something was qualitatively different about that moment, that place, that encounter, that vision, that conversation.

I’ve had a few moments like this in my life – albeit not nearly as clear or dramatic as Jacob’s ladder and the presence of God assuring me of promises of offspring and land.

But I’ve had moments of feeling wrapped up and held in God’s love while breathing in incense and experiencing the deep and resonate tones of monks singing in polyphonic chant, the sound vibrating up from the wooden

pews and bouncing off of the stone flooring and icon-covered walls.

I had a moment of knowing that God was with me and I was not alone while hyperventilating after a back injury, struggling to breathe, as I was being loaded up in an ambulance. I was at summer camp, so I didn’t know where I was being taken or how long I would be there or what even had happened, but in the middle of many constricted breaths gasping for oxygen – there was a moment where someone got me to take a deep breath – and it felt like the presence of God, or maybe just “life” itself. Who knows, perhaps those are one in the same thing.

I’ve had many moments of wondering if God was around during conversations – those exchanges where I felt heard and understood and where I could tell by the look in someone’s eyes that they did too.

And I've had *many* moments of listening to preachers as they speak and feeling very exposed myself – wondering – how do they know what is going on in *my* life? Are they speaking directly to me? Like God's voice is a laser from the preacher's mouth to my heart.

Maybe you have had some moments like this where you have felt something different and named it as God's presence. Or maybe, the reverse is true too. Maybe you were in a place or a situation where you surely thought that God *should* be present – that you *needed* God to be present – and you felt nothing. Nada. This can be an especially isolating feeling when it looks like everyone around you is feeling and experiencing something that you are not – and you wonder – *“Is something wrong with me or my faith that I am not feeling what they are feeling?”*

Whatever happened to Jacob that night when he woke up and said, *“Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!”* – whatever *that* feeling was, that element of surprise for Jacob... well, I'd like to think that *this* is what we feel when we're at the Table of God's Kin-dom: an

undeniable feeling of presence, of blessing, of abundance, and of hope – something that may catch us by surprise initially but then quickly becomes certain as we nod and say, *“Yes, THIS is God. This is what it feels like to have A Place at the Table...and to be in relationship with others...and to know that my life has meaning and purpose.”*

But perhaps, like Jacob, we so often do not know the presence of God in the places where we are not because God is *not* there, but because we are so focused on *our* place that we leave no room for God – let alone other people, which is – by the way – is one of the primary ways that God shows up in the world – through other people. That idea of the divine in the human? It's the incarnation and it's the heart of our Christian faith. It's one of the greatest teaching of Jesus' life; him showing us how to live as if God living in us is true and real and possible.

In any case, Jacob was very much focused on *his* place in the world. In fact, when Jacob has this dream encounter with God he is on the run. He's in self-preservation mode. He's fleeing from his twin brother Esau who, understandably, wants to kill him.

We already know that Jacob was born into a family with high expectations – given that God had chosen his grandpa Abe to be the special guy with a covenant with God that covenant was with Abe’s descendants too – just a wee bit of pressure for these heirs! And it was a family fraught with complicated family dynamics, to say the least as Morgan highlighted for us last week.

Though Isaac's name in Hebrew means "he will laugh," ironically I’m not sure how much Isaac really had to laugh about in his life – at least from what we know about his story:

- his parents were uber-ancient when he was born – and while probably very wise – I’m sure they couldn’t play with him on the floor and chase him around and keep up with him as a toddler like Isaac would have wanted;
- his half-brother Ishmael made fun of him, and sadly, because of that was sent away – the two never to talk again;
- he was almost killed by his own father – bound and put on an altar to die;
- at age 40, he got married to Rebekah – a wife his father’s servant found for him, but

then they struggled to conceive

But finally at age 60, Isaac had twin boys – Esau and Jacob: long-awaited heirs of a promise that began with laughter but seemed to be filled with a whole lot of pain and waiting and unknowns and “unfairs.”

This is the family dynamic Jacob is born into. And Jacob’s story is made all the more dramatic by the fact that as he and his brother left the womb and entered the world – Jacob came out gripping his older brother’s heel. And poor Esau never could quite shake Jacob off of him.

Jacob’s name in Hebrew, *yacov*, comes from the root word that means “*heel*,” which also means, in verb form, “*to follow*, *to be behind*,” or more sinisterly, “*to supplant*, *circumvent*, *assail*, *overreach*, *deceive*.”

In short, Jacob came out in second place and he spent his whole life trying to get in first place. He was not his father’s favorite – by birthright, blessing, or personality; his dad preferred Esau’s rugged nature and hobbies, but at least Jacob’s mom favored him. He liked to spend time with her cooking.

And not just food. They cooked up a plan, in fact, for Jacob to get THE Place at the Table that he wanted – the place of prominence, the place of birthright and blessing that came with not just honor but with real wealth and land and material possessions...and oh yes, a whole nation of people that would be “the chosen people of God.” Let’s just say, “the stakes were high.”

The plot to get a better seat at the Table, so to speak, began with Jacob as he tricked his brother out of a birthright – asking Esau to sell it to him when he was famished, or else Jacob wouldn’t give him anything to eat. This whole situation reminds of how my husband Damon’s older brothers, when they grew out of their clothes, wouldn’t just give Damon the clothes as hand-me-downs, they put price tags on the clothes and made Damon work and purchase the clothes from them! Ha! I suppose brothers will be brothers!

But then Rebekah got in on the plot too. Maybe by helping Jacob get a better place at the Table, it would help her feel better about her place – or maybe find her place – or purpose – who knows. Why she

deceives one of her children and her husband is lost on me, but something in her must have been yearning for significance too.

Because the whole stealing the blessing thing was Rebekah’s scheme. She overheard Isaac tell Esau to go out and hunt and get some meat for a final meal that then would become the occasion of Isaac passing along his blessing to Esau, his eldest son.

But while Esau is out hunting, Rebekah disguises Jacob as Esau and helps him cook her husband’s favorite meal and Jacob proceeds to deceive his father – in appearance and presence, and in words and heart. And it works.

And though this was Rebekah’s plot, Jacob is not innocent. Two times in this exchange, Isaac gives Jacob an opportunity to back out or confess. First he asks, “*Wait a second, how did you find, kill, prepare, and cook that game so quickly?*” That could have been a moment for Jacob to snap out of it and fess up – but instead he brings God into this plot saying that “*God granted him success.*” But then a second chance comes – Isaac says, “*Come closer because you really sound like Jacob...not*

Esau,” and yet Jacob’s conscience still doesn’t kick in – he just draws closer to his father offering him his fake furry hand – which is enough to convince Isaac. And we didn’t read this verse – but there is actually a THIRD chance that Jacob has to fess up in verse 24 when Isaac asks his son directly, “*Are you really my son Esau?*” To which Jacob replies, “*I am.*”

Wow. The audacity. That is some bold face lying right there. Jacob knows exactly what he is doing. Though Jacob already has a Place at the Table, so to speak, he steals what he thinks is the better seat – by getting the blessing from his father in verses 28-29 that reads:

“May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.

Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.

Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

Momentarily – it looks like Jacob has won. He has deceived his way into *his* desires and into Divine favor, or so he thinks.

But when Esau comes back and realizes what has happened he is angry. And Esau will not let his place at the Table be taken over without a fight. He demands a blessing from his dad too, saying, “*have you only ONE blessing? Surely not...bless me, too.*” (v 38). You see, Esau speaks truth in this moment that we cannot overlook...that blessing is not a limited commodity (we’ll come back to this in a bit). Isaac thinks he’s already given away all that he can, but he replies with this blessing, nonetheless,

“You’ll live far from Earth’s bounty, remote from Heaven’s dew.

You’ll live by your sword, hand-to-mouth, and you’ll serve your brother.

But when you can’t take it any more, you’ll break loose and run free.”

(Genesis 27:39-40, *The Message*)

It definitely feels like a consolation prize, doesn’t it? Basically Isaac tells Esau, you’re going to suffer for a while but at some point you’ll be able to break away from your brother and when that window comes – take it – and run! It’s

more like advice than a blessing!

It does not appease Esau. He is so angry he wants to kill Isaac. And Rebekah hears about this, and once again, gives Jacob a heads up and tells him to flee for his life – so Jacob does.

And ironically, we find Jacob, the one who has stolen the best “seat at the Table” so to speak – without a seat (or even a pillow) at all. He’s on the run, without anything or anyone with him. He is alone and scared. And in this moment, in THIS moment – God shows up to Jacob. Why God doesn’t show up a few chapters earlier to prevent all this from happening – I don’t know – but in this moment, God shows up.

And this is gospel good news – that God never gives up on us. That even when we have been the ones to cause harm, quite intentionally and even deceitfully, that even when we are the ones who have “won” by the world’s standards – at the expense of those we love even, even at THAT lowest point – God shows up and not only does God shows up – God blesses us.

God is so bent on blessing us that God will bless us even when we have done nothing to deserve that blessing and everything to deserve otherwise.

But here’s the even better gospel truth in the blessing that Jacob receives in the dream:

God uses the very blessing that Jacob was trying to steal and gain for himself to show Jacob the grace and place that God has us ALL. You see, Jacob thought he was stealing his dad’s blessing for himself, but God says to Jacob, this blessing is not for YOU, the blessing is so that YOU can be a blessing to the NATIONS of the world – from the west to the east, the north to the south – all the families of the earth (including your brothers) will be blessed. Jacob thinks this blessing has been all about him, but ultimately the blessing is not about him, it’s about the world. The blessing is not for Jacob’s personal gain, rather, through this blessing *the peoples of world* may be blessed. As one scholar put it, God says to Jacob – “yes the blessing is for you AND the blessing is for everyone else too.”¹ And it’s your job to show them this

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Podcast: #460: Jacob’s Dream – Sept.

26, 2021,” *Working Preacher, Narrative Lectionary* (Sept. 19, 2021), accessed on Sept. 25, 2021 at

blessing and help make it happen! You are not special; you are significant yes, just as each person is, but you are not special. The world is much bigger than you are aware of Jacob. The goodness that I'm showing you, is also the goodness that I show everyone and if you find your place at my Table, you'll never be on the run again or fighting for your seat or place."

Like Jacob, we spend a lot of time fighting for "seats at these Tables" don't we? And in so doing, we miss the goodness before us.

At least those of us who already have a seat at the Table – we like to fight about which seat is better and we might try out several seats before settling into the place that we stake a claim on as our own, telling ourselves we've earned this chair, this place, this position. Or maybe just thinking we should be able to try out different seats and pick them one we like best. Just like our Sunday morning pew! We think there is a better dish of food a few chairs to our right or left – or even a bit of power at the head of the Table itself – getting to call the shots of when

people pick up their forks to eat or when the next course is served – but in truth – all of those games we play around our tables – they are just that games, they are not gospel. But they are games with real consequences, of course.

For others, there is a true and real fight for a seat at our earthly tables because they have been dismissed from the Table or not allowed to ever sit down in the first place – or they've been given a seat and ignored even as they sit there. And this type of fight for a seat at the Table is a faith-filled fight – because I think these individuals see (in their mind's eye) the "Table of God" and they want to make that earthly table God's Table. They know their belovedness and they believe they belong at the Table too. For some – to fight for a place at the Table is literally NOT about fighting at all, but about finding a place of value and worth because that has been denied to them because of who or how they love or the color or their skin or what country they were born in or how they entered our country or what education level they have or what language they speak. It may feel like fighting

for seats for those of us who are already at the Table, but that's only because it may affect who we are sitting by – we may have to scoot down or scoot over or share our favorite dish with others rather than getting a second or third helping for ourselves – but that is just the reality of what it means for ALL of God's children to be at the Table. The Table is gonna be longer and wider and there will be more seats and the seats might get shuffled around and we may not always be by our friends and we may find ourself further away from our favorite dish than we prefer – but guess what? There is enough for all. There are enough seats for all. There is enough blessing for all. And so when it feels like a fight to us to try to keep our seat at the table, when we start to have that creeping feeling that we're being pushed out, well maybe we could see that not as a fight but as a moment of faith – a moment of revealing what it means to share the Table with others who have never had a seat, or never been fully seen or recognized.

In terms of our earthly tables, some of us probably know what it's like to feel like Jacob – like we've played second fiddle all our lives to our older brother

and we just want to be seen and known for who we are – and we'd like to be the FIRST at something for once. And so we do things that we're not proud of perhaps – to try and get ahead in the world. And sometimes they work, so we keep doing them until it becomes normalized behavior. And maybe they aren't even our idea – but someone in our life like a Rebekah – tells us that this is how one goes about getting a blessing – and we go along with it because we are so desperate for that blessing we don't even realize we're caught in a system that is bigger than us. What feels normal is actually quite absurd...but we can't see it.

Others of us know what it's like to feel like Esau. To feel like, because of who we are and when we were born and how we entered this world, well – certain things are a given. We have a place because of the ways of the world and what birth order privilege – or any other kind of privilege – gives us. And even with that privilege – we work hard, we are out doing our jobs every day and trying to provide for our family, and it can feel like while we're out doing what we're supposed to do – Jacob's are coming along and taking out from under

us what is rightfully ours. We can't see Jacob's perspective because we are so raging mad about what we think has been taken from us that we never realize that maybe nothing was taken at all. Maybe there is *enough blessing* for all. And maybe it has nothing to do with how hard we work or what we deserve or don't deserve or what privileges we were born with.

Some of us might feel like Isaac – like the one who has set the Table and is trying to ensure everyone is in their rightful place and no matter what we try – we are deceived and it doesn't work – revealing to us that perhaps the whole Table we were setting had a flawed premise – that some receive more blessing than others, more land than others, more wealth than others, more family than others. And sure – this happens in life – but it shouldn't be something we try to control or orchestrate or continue to sanction or bless. Because it just creates scarcity and pain when really all we want is for people to see and experience abundance and hope.

And maybe some of us can relate to being Rebekah. Having an idea of who should get what at the Table and someone we

love and care about – when we see they are not at the Table or not getting their fair share – then we do whatever it takes to get them at the Table – maybe not even realizing that while we are helping one son, we are hurting another, and hurting ourselves too – it should be noted that when Jacob flees for his life, Rebekah never sees him again. This whole grand plan which was to help her beloved son have it all, just turned out meaning that she had to send him away with nothing on the run and she never got to see him again before she died.

Whether you are like Jacob and just want a seat at the Table or just want to be seen at the Table, or whether you are like Esau and feel like you've had the rug pulled out from under you – your familiar seat taken from you and you're feeling lost, displaced. Or if you're like Isaac and can't recognize the very Table you've spent your life setting. Or if you're like Rebekah – trying to do something nice for someone you love and care about, but not fully acknowledging the consequences of your actions on other people (even other people you love) – all of this fighting for a seat and a place --- it's just exhausting, isn't it?

And does any of this actually help us create the Table of God's Kin-dom? I don't think so.

Because the Table of God's Kin-dom does not need to be created by us – it's already been created by God. We just have to see that it is here – in front of us – with seats enough for all, jobs enough for all, food enough for all, love enough for all, water enough for all, health insurance enough for all, education enough for all, housing enough for all, faith enough for all, citizenship and rights enough for all, justice enough for all, equitable treatment for all – which is, in and of itself, the definition of ENOUGH FOR ALL. Where there is equity, there is enough.

As long as we believe that the Table never quite has enough, we'll keep fighting for our seats. BUT - if we can see that the Table has enough, we'll act as if it is true and start pulling up more chairs and dishing out more portions – not fearing what we might lose – but only celebrating what others might gain, and honestly, what WE gain by them gaining.

Now does that Table sound like a long ways off from the Tables we find ourselves at today? Definitely. But that doesn't mean that Table isn't within our reach. Remember Jacob's dream – the stairway of connection between heaven and earth. Perhaps the ability to recognize that God is in this place is all about our ability to recognize that God is in this place – and in this face and that face, in your face and in my face...and if God is in this place, that means God is in every single person and every single person's voice and experience and life matters – no matter how different than our own. The gospel reminder from God to Jacob in this dream is that the Table is to be "on earth as it is in heaven." We do not compete for God's blessing, we celebrate that God's blessing is already ours; and we condition ourselves to feel it. We do not fight for a place at the Table, we have faith that at God's Table, our place is prepared and waiting for us – and everyone else too.

If we cannot dream it, and if we cannot see it, if we cannot visualize it and if we cannot voice it – then we will continue to live in this world as if the Table of God's kin-dom is not a reality for the here and now. But

if we start imagining this kind of
a Table at EVERY table we sit
at – no matter how big or small
– whether at our workplace or in
our home or in our church – if
we start sitting down at every
table and imagining that at this
table there is enough for all and
all are welcome and how can we
pull up more seats and chairs
and ensure every place is
purposeful – then, I think, we
will start saying more and more,
*“Surely the Lord is in this place
– and I do know it...I know it for
sure.”*

Amen.