

**+ Genesis 28:10-17 + The Foolishness of the Cross: The Cross Means Denying Self +
+ 2nd Sunday in Lent + 21 February 2016 +**

"I can do it myself!" The little boy struggles as his arms and head get all tangled up in his shirt. "I'll do it myself!" The father says to himself as he tackles a long stretch of snow that his kids forgot to clear. "I can do it myself!" The employee tells herself as she takes on a project too big for one person, but she wants that promotion. "I can do it myself!" The elderly grandma refuses to accept help from others in spite of her failing health.

"I can do it myself!" No matter your age, your gender, or your cultural background, those are familiar words, aren't they? Why are you and I so quick to "do it myself"? Is it stubbornness? "I'm going to do it no matter the cost." Do you think too highly of yourself? Do you think you have strength or wisdom or talent that you really don't? "I'm going to do it because no one else can do it better." Is it because the job has to get done? "If I don't do it, who will?" Does your independence keep you from admitting that you need help? Do any of these motives sound like good reasons?

There is value in having a healthy amount of independence. There is good in being able to humbly acknowledge that you have God-given gifts and strengths, and there are times when a healthy amount of stubbornness can be valuable. Nevertheless where does "I can do it myself" typically lead? What usually happens when I depend only on me, myself, and I?

The little boy gets hopelessly tangled in his shirt. The father's stubbornness causes himself unnecessary physical pain. The employee's overconfident pride leaves her overwhelmed, unable to do a good job. The grandma's independence leaves her helpless at the worst moment. "I can do it myself" can lead to "I shouldn't have done it myself" with often painful, regrettable results.

From little on, Jacob had an "I can do it myself" attitude that was willing to use and deceive people to get his own way. Now before his birth, God had promised to Jacob's parents that he would receive the family inheritance and the promise of the Savior through his family line. Jacob's father Isaac had received that promise from his father Abraham years before, but there was one problem. Jacob was the younger of two twin boys. His brother Esau would've normally received the birthright and promise as the older brother, but God had promised them to Jacob. To complicate matters even more, Esau was Isaac's favorite son, while Jacob was his mother's favorite.

Jacob wasn't quick to trust the Lord to fulfill his promise. So he took it upon himself to get what he wanted. One day Esau came home from a long hunt completely famished. He thought he would die from hunger, when he found Jacob making a pot of stew. Jacob cleverly made him an offer. "I'll give you this pot of stew for your birthright." Esau cared more about his stomach than his family future at that moment, so he made the foolish trade.

Getting his way only made Jacob more confident in himself, which made him even more willing to risk everything for himself. He was supposed to get that blessing with the promise of the Messiah from his father Isaac, but playing the favorites, Isaac wanted to give that blessing to Esau. Rather than trust God to work it out, Jacob and his mother came up with a plan.

While Esau was away on a hunt, Rebekah prepared Isaac's favorite meal the way he liked it. Then she had Jacob dress in Esau's best clothes and covered his hands and neck with goatskins. That way Isaac, whose eyesight was failing, wouldn't know that he was blessing Jacob instead of Esau because Jacob would look and smell like his brother.

Jacob's self-serving plan worked, but the results were terrible. Moments after Jacob had left his father, Esau arrived ready to receive that blessing with a meal prepared for his dad. But Isaac had already given the family blessing to Jacob. Esau realized how his brother had deceived him. Anger and revenge welled up in Esau who promised, **"The days of mourning for my father are near; after his death I will kill my brother Jacob."** (Genesis 27:41) Jacob's self-serving deceit and lack of trust in the Lord put his life in danger. His "I can do it myself" had become "I shouldn't have done it myself."

Rebekah and Isaac realized that their son had to flee far away from his vengeful brother. So Isaac honestly blessed his son and sent him to relatives in the distant north. Jacob went from being a favored son to an exile. He left everything behind—all the comforts of home, all his stuff, and all his family. Every step farther from home reminded him how foolish he was to serve himself, how foolish he was to lie and cheat to get himself something that God had promised to give.

Jacob had been traveling for a couple days when he stopped somewhere for the night. He had no tent to set up, no sleeping bag to roll out, no pillow for his head. Instead **“taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.”** Crushed by his sin and exhausted from the journey, Jacob fell asleep with his head on a rock, but he was soon dreaming.

Jacob saw a ladder that was **“resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven...”** Remarkably **“the angels of God were ascending and descending”** on that ladder. Most amazing of all was the vision of the Lord of free and faithful grace himself standing above it all. For a brief moment, the Lord of grace was pulling back the curtain for Jacob, who so painfully realized his sin against God, to show him pardon and forgiveness.

Jacob finally realized that everything was alright between God and him. The Lord was standing at the top of that ladder, wasn't he? Wasn't he letting his angels come from Jacob up to him, and then go back down to Jacob? The sinner knew that he was standing in God's favor. Jacob was penitent (sorry) for his sin, and God knew that Jacob needed his pardoning mercy.

Because of that pardoning mercy, the Lord had some amazing, important promises for Jacob. **“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. 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. 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.”** The God of grace wanted Jacob to realize that the promises of the land and countless descendants and a Savior all applied to him as they had applied to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac.

Someday Jacob's descendants would possess the land he was fleeing and cover it with countless people, but above all, **“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.”** A great Descendant was coming who would not be like self-serving Jacob, who would instead willingly give his own life for all people of all nations of all time. Through that Offspring, God's free and faithful forgiveness would come to all humanity.

...But that's the future. What about the present? For Jacob, he need no longer have an “I can do it myself” attitude. Instead no matter where he went, no matter what he endured, the Lord of grace would be with him. The Lord of grace would watch over him and bring him home someday.

When Jacob woke up the next morning, he realized that he, a self-serving sinner, had been in the presence of the holy God and that filled him with holy fear. **“Surely the Lord of grace is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”** Yet the Lord in his mercy had spared him there. That lonely, rocky spot was nothing short of heaven on earth. **“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”**

To Jacob, that place was the warm, kindly home where he had been allowed to meet the Lord of grace. That place was **“the gate of heaven”** where God had been pleased to make gracious contact with him. And Jacob changed that night. Oh, his self-serving sinful nature would still rear its ugly head, but as the years went on Jacob depended more and more on his Lord.

When you and I get caught up in our own self-serving ways, when our “I can do it myself” becomes “I shouldn't have done it myself,” what then? You and I don't have to flee a murderous sibling, but the painful, regrettable consequences of our self-serving ways are just as obvious. Every step after reminds you of your stubbornness, your pride, your loneliness, your guilt, your self-serving ways. The Lord in his holiness makes you see that bright, glaring mirror of his Law and what do you see? An ugly, selfish you.

What else can you do than cry out, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner! I can't do it myself!”? Such a realistic, penitential look at your life and actions makes you wonder, “How could I possibly think I can do what's right, what's best in God's sight? How could I possibly think I'd be able to do it all on my own?” Then you hear Jesus, and his words cut you to the heart. **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”** (Mark 8:34-35)

“I have not done that. I have followed my own sinful self and not followed Jesus beneath the cross. I have followed my own self-serving ways rather than rely on him alone. How can I take up my cross and follow Jesus?” While God doesn't come to you in a dream, as he did for Jacob, he does come through his Word and Sacraments with the same pardoning mercy and forgiveness. He points you to Jesus—God's gracious love in the flesh.

Jesus is that long-promised Descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, unlike Jacob, didn't hesitate to give his life, his all to give you pardon and peace with God. Jesus is the fulfiller of all those promises. Jesus is the forgiver of your sins. Jesus is the bearer of the cross that opens that path between you and God. See how willingly Jesus sacrifices everything to become a human being in this selfish, sinful world. See how willingly Jesus sacrifices everything he could've had by going to betrayal and suffering and the cross. See how willingly Jesus sacrifices everything to forgive your self-serving ways, your deceit, your stubbornness, your pride, your foolishness.

See how Jesus willingly sacrifices everything to give you forgiveness, to give you peace with God, to give you a life focused on him and those around you that ultimately ends in the glories of heaven. See how Jesus did all that for you so you can deny self and take up your cross and follow him.

In Jesus, "I can do it myself" becomes "He did it all for me." That Savior is with you. That Savior watches over you, and that Savior will bless you. So my friends, follow that Savior beneath the cross. Amen.