

Genesis 33:1-17 ~ John 21:1-19
*Our Money Story: Restore*ⁱ
 4th of 4 Sermon Stewardship Series
 Reign of Christ ~ Stewardship Dedication Sunday ~ November 20, 2022
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Introduction to First Scripture Lesson:

Remember the night that Jacob wrestled with a man all the way into the morning, a man who turned out to be an angel of the Lord? I am about to read you the story of what happened next. This was the day that Jacob dreaded and feared with all his heart; the day that Jacob had to face his twin brother, Esau. The last Jacob had heard, Esau was ready to kill him. Esau was furious with Jacob because he had tricked Esau not once but twice: first, out of his birthright (who knew that lentils had that power?) And second, with a bit of ancient costume rigged up by his mother, Jacob received the blessing that papa Isaac had intended for Esau.

Crack: the relationship had fractured--brother against brother, seemingly beyond repair. So, with a sore hip and a fearful heart, Jacob limped toward Esau who had sent for him, sure that Esau was coming to kill him and all his family. Now we are ready to hear what happened next, our first scripture lesson from the first book of the Bible, Genesis 33:1-17.

Introduction to the Second Scripture Lesson:

Our second restoration story takes place in the early morning mist by the Sea of Tiberius, after the seismic fracture between Simon Peter and Jesus. In his hour of suffering before his crucifixion, Peter had denied knowing Jesus not once, but three times, punctuated by the cock crowing. Crack! And now Jesus was dead and nothing made sense. Everything seemed broken. Might as well go fishing, go back to their old story. So, they fish all night long but catch nothing. Not a single fish. Like Jacob, they too had an all-night wrestling match, not with a man/angel, but with their internal storm of grief, confusion, shame. They had no idea what to do next. Not even fishing was working anymore. And then they had a mysterious someone appear to them on the shore. Someone whom they did not recognize at first. I will pick up the story at verse 4.

Sermon

An old man was walking on the beach at dawn when he noticed a young man picking up starfish stranded by the retreating tide and throwing them back into the sea one by one. He went up to him and asked him why he was doing this. The young man replied that the starfish would die if left exposed to the morning sun. 'But the beach goes on for miles, and there are thousands of starfish. You will not be able to save them all. How can your effort make a difference?' The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. 'To *this* one', he said, 'it makes a difference.'ⁱⁱⁱ

When Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him, Jacob was one starfish that Esau threw back into the ocean of life. Jacob was prepared for a transactional resolution to avert bloodshed. He had brought two hundred and twenty goats, two hundred twenty ewes and rams, thirty camels, forty cows, ten bulls, and thirty donkeys. He hoped that would do it. By now, they were

grown businessmen, after all. Flood Esau with livestock, just maybe he would look beyond how Jacob had done him wrong.

But Esau forgave his brother. Fully and instantly: Jacob was restored, their relationship was restored. No goats or rams, donkeys or camels needed. Esau said to him, "I have enough, my brother, keep what you have for yourself." Forgiveness full and deep, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you," implored Esau to his brother Jacob. I can only guess, Jacob was shocked out of his socks (or sandals), stunned by what had just happened. Two brothers reconciled: a whole family restored. The family from whom the twelve tribes of Israel, indeed became a family with "offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number." This was how God had encouraged Jacob earlier as he was approaching his brother with fear and trembling (Genesis 32:12). Offspring as the sand of the sea—all because of one starfish named Jacob, aka "Israel" thrown back into the sea.

The part of this story where Esau runs to embrace Jacob with full forgiveness sounds a lot like the prodigal son parable Jesus told the Pharisees and scribes in Luke 15. Maybe, just maybe Jesus was riffing on this Jacob and Esau restoration, a story deep in their shared Jewish heritage. Jesus describes the moment between father and son in his parable like this: "So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) Yes, another starfish thrown back into the ocean of grace. Restored and forgiven. Jesus' mission on earth in a nutshell, or shall we say a seashell?

God knows our world needs repair. And so does our nation: we are fractured and divided as a country. Certainly, our recent midterm elections have confirmed this reality. Yet as divided as we are, there are so many things more important things on which we all agree: Our planet earth on which we all depend, is dying from global misuse, a global problem that is accelerating and increasingly urgent. Our immigration policy is broken and needs reform; our democratic system of government also needs repair. Surely, we can find a way to work together to restore our nation and our planet.

Tikkun olam, which means "world repair" is an important concept found in the Mishnah, the classic rabbinic teachings from the third century. *Tikkun olam* is a useful and important Hebrew that means "world repair." All forms of action to repair and improve the world are *tikkun olam*. I believe each of us can take part in this project and we must—if we love Jesus. If we want to be Jesus' disciples. It is our way of thanking God for life, it is our way of sharing the love of Christ our savior who throws us back into the ocean of grace again and again. To engage in "world repair" is the work of mending or perfecting the world (remember this kind of perfecting means "making whole"). But that work for each of us is different. You were put on this earth to do your part of *tikkun olam* that no one else can do. You have gifts, energy, relationships, and opportunities to repair the world, one person at a time, that no one else will be given.

As Christ's body we call FPC we were put on this earth to do work that no other church can do. Being a Matthew 25 church, means we are committed to eradicating systemic poverty,

dismantling structural racism, and building congregational vitality. This is our call to action to do what we can to restore the “least of these” individually and systemically. This call takes its cue from Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25, “I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (from Matt. 25:35). Here too, we find this thread, where Jesus is helping us to see our call to engage in *tikkun olam*, one starfish at a time. We saw the risen Christ model this approach after breakfast on the beach with Peter. He looked into his eyes, addressed Peter individually three times and said: “If you love me, feed my sheep.”

My takeaway is this: When it comes to repairing the world, as Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain put it, “We do not have to redeem the world all together in one go. We do it one day at a time, one person at a time, one act at a time. A single life, said the sages, is like a universe. Save a life and you save a world. Change a life and you begin to change the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Soon, you will be invited to bring your financial pledges for 2023 and offerings forward to put in the little church and this offering plate. This is a ritual we do once a year to help us remember, release, reimagine, and restore our money story. A chance to realign our story with God’s story for us. When we do this in a few moments, I invite you to think of this ritual as an embodied prayer of thanks to God for who and whose we are. And from that gratitude comes our response, our unique way of saying, “Yes, Jesus, I love you and want to feed your sheep.”

Before we do that, I want to lift up some of the many ways I believe that we are all about *tikkun olam*, that is *world repair*, right here at FPC.

- One smile, one hug as you enter church on a Sunday morning.
- One refugee family resettling, finding a home, starting a new life, right here in Marshfield.
- One walker, wheelchair, or shower chair to one person, as their body heals from a fracture.
- One Habitat house built by many hands, young and old in partnership with one family becoming homeowners for the first time in their lives.
- One child in Sunday School experiencing the love of Jesus through a Bible story, a craft project, the look in their teacher’s eye, in a new and deeper way, or for the very first time.
- One teen, struggling to feel seen and heard, accepted, and affirmed, as they are coming to know their own identity.
- One batch of soup delivered with love to someone who needs warming nourishment for their body and soul that very night
- One family fed for several days, after being served at SOS with a bounty of groceries.
- One book discussion at the Open Book Group, that sparks a new insight, fresh inspiration, a deeper understanding of the fractures we are called to heal.
- One card sent to someone who needs encouragement at just the right time
- One pollinator in our butterfly garden, one ripe tomato from the community garden, one Prairie restored, one battery recycled instead of adding to the landfill.
- One anthem sung, one bell choir piece rung, or a hymn sung together, with its healing vibrations deeply soothing our bodies and spirits like nothing else on this earth can do.

There are many more—and the more we give, the more we can do to restore this world that Christ came to save. One starfish at a time.

ⁱ “Our Money Story” stewardship theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Taken from Loren Eiseley, the American Anthropologist as told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, (Shoken Books: New York, NY, 2005), p. 72. My source regarding the term *tikkun olam*, was also from this book.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.