

July 8, 2012

Jacob
God's Catfish
Genesis 31:19-31

Opening Words: This is sermon number six in my summer sermon series on Jacob. To date, we have looked at his ancestry. His grandfather was Abraham and his father was Isaac. We have looked at his fraternal twin brother, Esau. He was the one who was born red and hairy. (He must have been a handsome lad!) He was the one who lost both the birthright and the blessing. We have looked at how those acts forced Jacob to leave his home. Removed from his nuclear family, Jacob is now living with his extended family. I hate to say this but last week we learned he married his first cousins, Leah and Rachel. He loved Rachel more. Do any of these things sound familiar?

Time is short so I am forced to leave out two significant points in this series. First, Jacob became the father of twelve sons with four different women. The oldest was Rueben; the youngest was Benjamin. Number eleven was Joseph. Those twelve sons would become the twelve tribes of Israel. (Genesis 29:31-30:24) Second, Jacob became a wealthy man. He and Laban's flocks increased. However, money is not everything. Today, we learn Jacob wants to break up his partnership with Uncle Laban and returning home. May God give you ears to this morning's scripture lesson, Genesis 29:15-30. Let me call the message *God's Catfish*.

Genesis 31:19-31 19 When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods. 20 Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. 21 So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead. 22 On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. 23 Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. 24 Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." 25 Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too. 26 Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war. 27 Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of timbrels and harps? 28 You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. 29 I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' 30 Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's household. But why did you steal my gods?" 31 Jacob answered Laban, "I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force.

Chuck Swindoll first told this story. One of the great commercial industries in the northeastern United States is codfish. It is caught, prepared and ship all over the

country. However, the great demand for the codfish caused a problem. At first they froze the codfish before shipping, but freezing them took away much of the flavor. Then they tried shipping the codfish alive in salt water, but that didn't work either. Finally, someone hit on a creative solution. The codfish were placed in a shipping tank with their natural enemy, the catfish. From the time the codfish left the east coast until they arrived at their destination, the catfish chased the codfish all over the tank! When they arrived, the codfish were as fresh as when they were first caught with no loss of flavor or texture. Sometimes a little adversity is a good thing! Have you ever stopped to consider that your enemies are helping you be a better person? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

Who is the catfish in your life? You can call them personal enemy number one. Life is not easy; Life is not always pretty. Your catfish maybe your ex-spouse. You married when you were young. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. The only thing you have to show for your time together now is divorce decree and the children. In time, everyone remarried and life moved forward. However, your conversations with the "ex" are still strained. They would love to see your life fall apart again and you wish the same for them. Your catfish maybe your neighbor. You live side by side daily but you haven't spoken in years. You are tired of them shooting fireworks off their back porch; they are tired of your barking dog, Barney. They can't wait for you to move away. Your catfish maybe a co-worker. She is a micromanager and you see the big picture. Your catfish maybe your mother-in-law. You have been part of the family for years. You have done nothing wrong and everything right. However, she still hates you because you were not good enough for her baby. Your catfish maybe your brother, who thinks you are a joke? Do I have to go on? Everyone has a catfish fish in their life? We all have someone who wants to see us fail.

Jacob's catfish was his Uncle Laban. For twenty years he lived with Laban in Haran. You can do the math with me. Jacob spent seven years laboring for Leah. Jacob spent seven years laboring for Rachel. In chapter thirty, he worked more six more years with Uncle Laban. That twenty year period was filled with both the good and the bad. Professionally, everyone prospered. However, there was something that just wasn't right. Jacob didn't trust Laban. Can you blame him? The tension began when Laban outwitted Jacob. Their relationship did not improve through the years. Laban had changed Jacob's wages ten times. (31:7) Now, Laban's sons began to question this business partnership. (31:1) Their critical words signaled the end. Jacob knows it is time to return home and face his old nemesis, Esau. Without a parting word, he collects his possessions, his wives and his children. He begins the journey home. For ten days everything is good. Then everything suddenly changes. Someone spots Laban traveling toward them from the north. Jacob knows this is not being to be pretty. Jacob is tired of the Laban's poor treatment. Laban is trying to save his family and his business. Jacob is being confronted by his catfish. When was the last time you were confronted by your catfish?

Today, I don't want to hear your ugly stories. Instead, I want to talk about three ways our catfish make us better people. It is possible to be too comfortable in life. The

catfish in your life is not sent to destroy you. They are sent to improve you. They are sent to keep you healthy and alert. Without them, we would get fat and flabby. Without them, we would get lazy and complacent. If you are ready to begin looking at three ways our enemies improve us then say, **"Amen!"** Each one is illustrated in Jacob's story.

Challenge our Weaknesses

First, the catfish in our lives challenge our weaknesses. Sometimes don't change. Do you remember why Jacob was living in Haran? He went to this foreign land to escape Esau. He had tricked him out of his birthright and the blessing. Esau was frustrated with his brother and was going to confront him. Jacob was intimidated by his manly brother so he ran away. Just think about it more a moment. He lost twenty years of his life because he refused to confront his brother. Twenty years later, Jacob is running away from his uncle because he can't confront uncle. He had fathered twelve sons at this point but he wasn't man enough to confront his fear on conflict. Our catfish challenge our weaknesses. What is your greatest weakness?

There are as many weaknesses as there are people. Do you know anyone who is a procrastinator? Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? Do you of anyone who is afraid to take a risk? They once interviewed one hundred one hundred year olds. They asked them the question, "What would you do differently in your life?" Ninety-nine of the one hundred one hundred year olds said "Take more risks!" Do you know of anyone who lacks conviction? They just can't be assertive? Do you know of anyone who is compulsive or lacks discipline? Do you know of anyone who is like Jacob? They just can't confront a problem. What is your weakness? If you can think of something say, **"Amen!"**

Challenge our Behavior

Second, the catfish in our lives challenge our behavior. There is no nice way to say this. Jacob was a cheat. He knew actually what he was doing when he traded Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew. He knew actually what he was doing when he his exploited his own father's eyesight for the blessing. When he leaves home he is confident he is an outstanding hustler. Then, he meets Uncle Laban, who is truly an outstanding hustler. The way he had treated Esau was the way Laban had been treating him. You know it is true. The people we struggle with the most are just like us. Our catfish challenge our behavior. Is your behavior pleasing to Christ?

Our world is changing. We can justify anything in our time. Consider these three things with me.

First, according to Education-Portal.com, 85% of college students have admitted to cheating at some point in their academic careers. They justify their cheating by saying no one really gets hurt.

Second, did you know over \$13 billion of goods are stolen each year from American retailers? They just justify it by saying the prices are too high.

Third, did you know 1.6 million Americans cheat on their taxes? Did you know the United States treasury annually loses \$270 billion dollars in unreported income? They justify their cheating by saying the government wastes our money?

Do I have to go on? Is your behavior pleasing to God? Would anyone here accept cheating as acceptable behavior? Would anyone here tolerate being cheated? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

Challenge our Faith

Third, the catfish in our lives challenge our faith. You remember the piece of scripture. Someone asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment. (Mark 12:28-31) Jesus says, "*Love the Lord your God with all of our heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" In other words, we are to love God completely. Jesus offered the second greatest commandment without being asked. The Master said, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" You do not need an advanced degree to understand what Jesus is saying. The Master is saying we are to love everyone. Does anyone believe at this point in the story Jacob loved Laban? Can anyone here tell me they love their catfish? Listen to what I am about to say. If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ then the faith should be altering the way that you live. God expects you to love your catfish. If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Laban was Jacob's catfish. Who is your catfish?

His name was Jim Langmead and he was my catfish. The names have not been changed to protect the innocent. He was a pain in my catfish. He was just one of those dominating guys. He dominated his family and they dominated my church. His brother was the chair of the Board of Trustees. His father was the church lay leader. Using that title he decided to attend all the church committees so they could regulate all the church activities. His wife and mother were the co-chairs of the finance committee. Jim was the chair of the stewardship committee so he got involved in every financial decision that church made. His attitude was he raised the money so he could decide how to spend the money. This is the most damaging fact. He knew how much everyone gave and treated them appropriately. He took it upon himself to take the checkbook from the church treasurer and have her sign some checks. He would decide what really needed to be paid. They might have well have renamed the congregation the Langmead United Methodist Church.

I went to serve that church in July of 1989. I was not yet an ordained Elder but I knew a few things about church growth and congregational development. Those who have had a problem with me have called me dominating and arrogant. Maybe they are right? I have never questioned my calling into the ministry. I have never questioned my ability and gifts. I know what is best for my church and I am frustrated by people who challenge me. I am self motivated and don't take supervision well. If you are going to survive in the ministry then you better be thick skinned and self confident. I know why many congregations are dieing. Do you know why most churches stop growing? Most churches are dieing because an individual or a small group dominate everything. They only let the church grow to the point that they can control. With sincere hearts they micromanage the church and suck the life out of it. Are you glad we don't have any of

those people here? Jim Langmead dominated that church and we were on a collision course.

My first two years in that church were amazing. We welcomed a study stream of new members. There wasn't enough parking so we doubled the size of the parking lot. In a short time the dynamics of that church changed completely. Everyone was excited but one family, the Langmeads. They didn't know these new people and they didn't trust the new people. This was the biggest problem. Jim couldn't intimidate the new people. They were healthy individuals who were not intimidated by his ways. As chair of the Nominating Committee, I asked some of those new healthy members to assume some leadership, replacing his family members. They said, "Yes!" However, Jim Langmead and his family said, "No!" They began to cause trouble within the church. At the end of their reign they did three things. First, they created new rules and posted signs. Second, they locked up church property. They didn't want the new people to use their things. Third, they tried to regulate my activities. They wanted to know where I was going. They wanted to know what I was doing. When I was gone, they entered my home, the parsonage, to see if I was doing any damage. You know it is true. Two dominating people can not occupy the same space.

The tension between me and Jim Langmead grew until the final chapter. It sounds silly, I know. Most church conflicts sound silly to outsiders. The point on conflict in that church was the riding lawn mower. Without any permission from any church body, Jim Lagmead purchased a new expensive riding mower with church funds. He took the church into financial crisis. We called an emergency meeting. After a short discussion, everyone, except Jim Langmead, agreed on a course of action. I look at Jim Langmead and said, "You are going to have to return it. " He looked at me with a red face and said, "I dare you! Who do you think you are?" He exploded and called me everything but handsome. A guy by the name of Dick Pipoly, who normally said nothing, said words that changed the future of that church. He looked at Jim and said, "Jim, this has now become a personal matter. We are trying to do what is best for our church. You must return the lawn mower." With those words, Jim Langmead stormed out of the room with some ugly word. He took with him his wife, mother, father, brother and sister-in-law. The church talked about that day for the test on my tenure. For it was on that day the church was liberated. We went on to do some wonderful things for God. It was on that day, I truly became their spiritual leader. This is the truth.

I haven't seen Jim Langmead or his family sense that day. However, they did write letter to my District Superintendent and the Bishop about me and my emotional stability. (They may have been right. They drove me crazy.) However, if I ever seen Jim Langmead again, I am going to thank him. He helped me with my greatest weakness. Like Jacob, I too had a problem confronting problems. He forced me to look at my own arrogance. He helped me love and tolerate anyone. If I could love Jim Langmead then I could love anyone. Jim Langmead was my catfish. Who is your catfish? Why don't you thank them for making you a better person? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"