

I am a huge fan of *House Of Cards*.

I didn't even know there was an American version until Drew told me it was on Netflix...

I encountered the plotline early through the original BBC production, which incidentally, you can still get on Netflix or by borrowing my DVD box set.

I'm not sure what confessing that I love this series says about me – or about you, for that matter if you like it too, because those characters are just straight up horrible people.

I'm not sure which is worse – that Kevin Spacey can play the character so utterly convincingly, or that I, a minister no less, wind up actually pulling for the bad guy.

In the BBC original, much like its American counterpart, the central character is the whip in the House of Commons of Parliament. His job is, in his words, to “Put a bit of stick about,” which translates into using whatever means necessary to get the job done.

Snubbed by his boss, Francis Urquhart goes about systematically deceiving, conning, cheating, lying and ultimately, killing, in order to achieve his goals.

I knew something was fundamentally wrong when I found myself, as FU was offing the next obstacle, thinking to myself, “Well, of course he *had* to kill him.”

He, and Francis Underwood in the American version, are delightfully, deliciously malevolent.

But not all con-artists are so beguiling, are they?

Sometimes the folks we encounter who are the pieces of work around which we have to navigate our lives are no where nearly so winsome. Indeed, the type of person who indulges and even exults in the unfair strategy or the stolen advantage is generally much more unsavory, much less desirable to be around or to have in one's life.

We do well to run the other direction when we meet the con-artists, don't we?

I don't need negativity and difficulty in my life – you don't either. I got a meme sent to me recently that went something like this – I have to paraphrase it because I'm preaching and I am not going to use the one word, but it says basically, “before you diagnose

yourself with depression, anxiety or anger issues, make sure you're not in fact surrounded by jerks. (Use your imagination on that last word.)

When we can identify the problem people, we best run.

But we can't always run, can we? Sometimes we can't get away from the malevolent ones.

I think identity theft is about the lowest of crimes right now... it's so destructive and nihilistic – I can't quite fathom dismantling someone's life down to binary code and using it to reduce them to dollar signs, and all done anonymously. I've always felt like if you're going to stab me in the back, have the decency to stab me in the back to my face.

Jacob, of course, was an identity thief.

I read James's marvelous sermon from a couple of weeks ago and he was pretty clear about what sort of person we're dealing with here in the person of Jacob.

A quick recap: Jacob stole his brother's inheritance not once but twice. He stole his brother Esau's birthright – the inheritance due an older son – and then he stole his father's blessing from his twin brother – and with Esau breathing threats and murder, his mother Rebekah figured out fast that Jacob better get out of town.

And of course he does – he runs to his uncle's household a few counties away. And as soon as he gets there, what does his wandering eye behold but his beautiful cousin.

Rachel, we read, had come to water her sheep and well, the rest is pretty much history.

(By the way, I don't believe in sanitizing the Bible, so you should note that this is his *first* cousin. And that is only one of the reasons this story ought to give you a full-body shudder.)

So the story goes on and Jacob negotiates with his uncle in order to marry his cousin.

The DeBeers diamond cartel has done a marvelous job of convincing the American public that two months' salary is an appropriate price for an engagement ring, but DeBeers has *nothing* on Laban. Seven years' labor is the bargain that Jacob's uncle strikes with him. Work for him for seven years, and Rachel is his.

The wedding happens, I assume the bride was thoroughly and completely veiled given what transpires next, the marriage is consummated, and the next morning, Jacob discovers the trickery when it is Leah with the lovely eyes whom Jacob has married. When Jacob confronts Laban, “There ain’t no way to hide your lyin’ eyes,” a second bargain is struck, seven more years’ labor for the privilege of marrying the other sister. (That, incidentally, is cause for the second full-body shudder: Jacob married not one, but two of his first cousins, who were sisters. Don’t you ever tell me the Bible is boring.) But it is not like Jacob is a sympathetic character is it? If anyone ever had a comeuppance coming, it’s Jacob.

There is nothing more deeply satisfying than seeing someone get what they have coming to them, is there?

I love Anne Lamott’s story about her nemesis. She writes, “I had an enemy – an Enemy Lite – for some time, the parent of one of the children in Sam’s first grade class, although she was so warm and friendly that it might have astounded her to learn that we were enemies. But I, the self-appointed ethical consultant for the school, can tell you that it’s true. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that she was divorced and maybe lonely, but also she had mean eyes. In the first weeks of first grade she looked at me like I was a Rastafarian draft-dodger type and then, over time, as if I were a dazed and confused alien space traveler.”¹

I should not confess this, but I have felt the same way about a clergy colleague from time to time. It’s not anyone you know and really, he’s a perfectly fine person, but he just annoyed the ever-living fool out of me and for a while all I thought was that he needed just to be brought down a notch or two, and then, it actually happened, and I felt so bad for him that I had to take him to lunch to check in with him and he turned out to be an actual human being.

¹ Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, Anchor Books, NY 1999. P129

And then in God's ultimate, perverse irony, I had a hard time and he took me out to lunch and it turned out we were both human beings.

That is, after all, what Jacob is: an actual human being.

Here's the spoiler for the story: when Jacob reunites with his older brother Esau later on in the book of Genesis, his brother pours out grace and love all over him.

Here's the end of Anne Lamott's story, written as she picks up her own son from the home of the woman she has come to see as her enemy-lite, "Sam's shoes were on the mat by the front door, next to his friend's, and I went over to help him put them on. And as I loosened the laces on the one shoe, without realizing what I was doing, I sneaked a look in the other boy's sneaker – to see what size shoe he wore. To see how my kid lined up in shoe size.

And then I finally got it.

The veil dropped. I got that I am as mad as a hatter. I saw that *I* was the one worried that my child wasn't doing well enough in school. That *I* was the one who thought I was out of shape. And that *I* was trying to get her to carry all this for me because it hurt too much to carry it myself."²

Not all the time, but sometimes, what we see in others is really just our own flaws writ large, you know?

Sometimes we really do get done wrong by someone else. It's important to know the difference. There are no medals for keeping on taking it when someone is really and truly wronging you. I know the whole turn the other cheek line from the Bible, and it's real and true, but there's also something to be said for ducking from time to time.

But other times, what we see so wrong is really what's wrong in us.

Jacob ran off to get away from his brother and got wronged himself and had to sojourn some fourteen years in a strange land to learn a few things, and when he got homesick

² Ibid. p136

and began to make his way home again, there was a terrible wrestling match along the way when he had to come to grips with God and himself.

And then grace happened.

That's the good news of the Gospel: that grace happens. It wends its way in where we least expect it – or at least where it's most needed. That's how it happens some of the time.

Other times, it's less subtle. I love the way Paul puts it in Romans 8, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

And the answer so resoundingly put: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That's one of the most important lines in the Bible because it is the Gospel. Paul is writing it to the persecuted, to those Christians living in Rome who might indeed be experiencing the very persecutions that might just lead one to despair of humanity. Paul is so clear to say that God's love isn't based on anything we do, any perfection we achieve, but only on God's good grace. That's the promise we baptized Alexander into this morning.

That's the promise for us all.

What's more, God is completely realistic about us. God doesn't pretend that we aren't the sinners that we are. That God uses Jacob to get from Isaac to Joseph in the progression of the covenant is an affirmation that God gets that we are real, live, flesh and blood, frequently messed up human beings who more often than not miss the mark. To see ourselves as other than sinners is to delude ourselves. To see ourselves only as sinners is to objectify ourselves.

It's so easy to objectify people. That is, of course, what Jacob did to Esau and what Laban did to Jacob. They were just pawns and foils for what each conman wanted to accomplish – it's so easy to objectify people. I think you have to if you're going to do somebody wrong. And even though this is all true – God knows who we are and loves us anyhow.

We're not objects, we're people. We're God's people. You're not a lawyer-object, or a stay-at-home-parent object. You're not a doctor-object, and I'm not a minister-object. You are not a social worker-object or a night-manager-object, you and I are real, live, flesh and blood human beings for whom Christ died and on whom God's grace is poured out lavishly.

And because God's grace us poured out on us like the waters of baptism, we are called to abandon the objectification of people into commodity and political capital and negotiations and to refuse the efforts of others to turn others and ourselves back into objects.

That means rejecting a lot of things that seem normal and it may well mean embracing some behavior that comes off as quite abnormal. And I'm not going to tell you how to do it – actually, I'll give you a hint: read your newspaper or watch the news or go to NPR.org like I do and see the one thing that utterly dissatisfies you about the way things are - then do something about it. Research it, figure it out, write a check, show up, whatever you need to do, but for the love of God – literally – don't just shrug it off. Because that is the sacred messiness of what it is for us to be humans together in this endeavor that God called creation. There's a little bit of Jacob in all of us. There's a little bit of Laban in all of us. But before that – before that – there is the image of God on us, and at the end of the day, all that matters – the only thing that matters in the grand redemption story of creation that God is still writing, that God is still using us to affect –

is that at the end of the day because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, it is the image of God in us that defines who we are.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.