

Living in Community
(Autonomy in Community)
Genesis 32:22-32

Good morning! Much of what I am about to say is taken from an article written by Wieteke van der Molen of the Netherlands and published in the Courier. Erna and I heard her speak at Mennonite World Conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 2015.

Erna and I have lived in Paraguay and Israel, as well as visited another twenty countries. This exposure to a multitude of cultures, nationalities, and religions has been an enriching experience. Common to all these settings were the wonderful people we meet and got to know. These people formed diverse communities.

Living in community can present its challenges. Christian communities are not immune from these challenges. We observed this in congregations, on Mission Compounds in Brazil, and while volunteering with Serve Nazareth in Israel. The people we are closest to; be that biological, or church family, frequently present the greatest challenge to maintaining positive, wholesome relationships.

We read in Genesis that in the beginning, “man was alone”. Even though God created all the animals and brought them to him to be named, man was alone. And it did not sit well with him. God had empathy, and caused a deep sleep to settle upon him. God took his rib and from it created women.

From that day on there was community.

From the day we are born, we are a part of community. Whether it be a family, school, church, prison, or seniors living complex, we are never alone. The community feeds us, teaches us, guides us in choosing between right and wrong, raises us.

Community makes us stronger than we are, it provides a support network. We are many. Community however infringes on our independence, we need to bend our will for the common good of community; giving up much of our autonomy.

Our personal interests have a way of colliding with that of the group. This causes friction, pain, and frustration. However, we have no option. To be human is to be part of community. We cannot survive on our own.

Yet, we crave our independence, every one of us. Growing up, we test the rules and boundaries of our communities. You can see it in the toddlers, pushing the “no!” just a bit further to see what they can get away with. You see it in the rebellious teenagers as they strike out on their own, charting their own way in life.

Autonomy, literally means making your own rules. But is more commonly understood as charting your own path through life, being independent.

We certainly want a say in everything that effects us. We want to make our own choices, be masters of our destiny. In our current age we take pride in our autonomy, fending for ourselves, living by our own rules, championing them at all costs.

But autonomy is not all roses. In fact, it is a constant struggle. The Old testament records the well-known story of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham.

Before he is born, Jacob is in community. Even as an unborn child he doesn't take it well. He and his twin brother fight so fiercely inside the womb that their mother Rebecca wonders why she is alive. When he is born, Jacob is still grabbing his older brothers heel.

Jacob's self image (ego) is huge. Jacob is always number one. No rules but his own. He bends community around them.

Thus, without a second thought he swindles his brother Esau out his birthright with nothing more than a hot meal. Next, Jacob deceives his father. Isaac, blind in his old age, lying on his death bed, waiting for Esau to arrive, is hoodwinked by Jacob. Jacob pretending to be his older brother Esau ruthlessly steals the patriarchal blessing.

Jacob now has everything that rightfully belonged to Esau. He has gained it all, and at the same time, has lost it all. For he cannot stay in the community. He is despised and rejected. He has to flee for his life.

Living by our own rules, and living in community do not go well together.

In fleeing the scene of the crime, Jacob leaves everything. Or so he thinks. But just before he enters the great unknown, he has a dream. In that dream, God promises to go with Jacob wherever he may go. God will protect him, God will bring him back, God will not leave Jacob, until God has fulfilled His promise.

Typically, Jacob is not so sure.

He immediately starts negotiating. If God will really be with me, if God really will protect me, if God will really provide for me, well, then, yes, in that case, God will be my God. Jacob does not give

in easily. Oh no. If God wants to stay with him, fine. But Jacob is calling the shots. That is what autonomy is all about, isn't it?

We may identify with this scene. Have we perhaps attempted to negotiate with God. Longing for God's provision and protection on our terms.

The story continues. Jacob's love for his Rachel is legendary. But in attempting to marry her before her older sister Leah is married, Jacob once again tries to make community bend to his rules. Ironically he is no match for the tricks up Laban's sleeve, and ends up with four women in all.

After some twenty years of hard labour, God calls Jacob to return to Canaan. Jacob takes his wives, his children (11 sons and a daughter) and the huge herds he has gathered and sneaks off when Laban is busy shearing sheep.

Again, Jacob is making choices without considering the effect on other people. Living by his own rules, his own fears, his own assumptions. In sneaking off with his wives and children, he ignores the fact that they are a part of Laban's life as well; his future.

Of course, as an autonomous person this is his right. He lives by his own rules. No consideration for any kind of community.

Astonishing then, on the eve of coming home, Jacob has second thoughts. Jacob realizes that Esau might not be willing to welcome him home with open arms, considering the way he stole his birth-rite. Jacob attempts to appease him (secure the peace), by sending messengers ahead. But they return, saying Esau is coming to meet them with at least 400 men. Jacob (impressed, worried, scared) is now confronted

with the consequences of his earlier choices: what if Esau takes it all; wives, children, herds, riches? What if Esau wants revenge?

What if community destroys all that autonomy has gained him?

And so Jacob makes a bold decision: he offers it all to Esau, of his own free will. In doing so he is attempting to make amends. He acknowledges his wrong-doing, and the impact his decisions have had on Esau's life.

In offering up everything his autonomy has gained him, Jacob in fact is relinquishing his independence.

And so we enter that epic scene, where Jacob brings his wives and children, and all that he owns to the other side of the river and he returns. Now, he is totally and truly alone. He has nothing left. Not even his autonomy. And then somebody comes and wrestles with him. All night long. Somebody. No name. No identification, except the ominous – Why do you ask me for my name?(32:29). Is it God? One of God's messengers? Or should we understand this more metaphorically? Is Jacob in fact wrestling with himself?

Maybe. After all, the life of Jacob is one huge struggle with the people around him, and their rules and expectations, with himself and his own choices, his own path through life. Maybe in the end, he does wrestle with God, Or himself.

We may identify with this scene. Perhaps we too have struggled all-night (unable to sleep); with God, or perhaps our relationship with God. Or the bridges that need to be mended with another brother or sister created in the image of God.

Jacob emerges from his all night struggle a winner. With a new blessing. With a new name. No longer Jacob; “heelgrabber,” but Israel: “wrestles with God.”

Jacob no longer seeks to enrich himself by grabbing the heel of others, causing them to fall and fail. Instead, he struggles for the rest of his life, every day anew. With the people around him, with God, and mostly...with himself.

And interestingly, most of the time he comes out winning. Slightly limping, but winning non-the-less. And as he crosses the river, the spectacular, a new dawn. A patriarch is born. What a story!

But the truly amazing thing about the story of Jacob is that it does not explicitly condemn Jacob or his actions. There is no point in the narrative where God directly disapproves of what Jacob does.

You can sense that not all is good and wonderful, but the story is silent on the matter. The consequences of Jacob's actions are apparent: he has to flee and leave everything behind. He lives in constant fear, of Esau, of Laban, and of Esau again. He needs to start all over again, numerous times.

The story tells you all that. But the story never tells you that Jacob did wrong. You can feel it. You can read it between the lines, but it is all left to your imagination. The story never says so.

That is what makes it such an intriguing story. Jacob is no holy, immanently good or pious member of humanity. He is a great example because he is not exemplary at all. He is just like us, with our faults and failures. And so in our heads and hearts, we easily fill in the blanks. We feel how utterly wrong some of his decisions are, as if they were our

own. We shiver as we think of the consequences. We wait, anxiously, for the story to go sour.

But it never does. Despite living by his own rules and never quite recognizing the rights of others, there is no judgment of Jacob except the censorship which he imposes on himself. Fundamentally, that is what this story is all about. Autonomy. Living by your own rules. Making and abiding by your own standards.

Autonomy is not limited to making your own choices and living by your own rules, but includes judgment of yourself as well. You have to figure it out yourself. God merely walks with you, regardless what the outcome. God never forsakes or abandons us. It is Jacob who makes demands and sets conditions, not God.

And that is an Old Testament lesson for us living in the present age, craving independence. Autonomy comes with the acknowledgement that the people around us (our community) limits our freedom to make our own decisions, our own rules. Autonomy is not about making our own rules no matter what, but about realizing, accepting and acknowledging the other people in our lives. It is about mutual respect of one another, because together we form community.

So the challenge is: Can I live my life free and autonomously WITHIN community.

Am I mature enough to acknowledge that I am fully in charge of my life? Can I accept that I am bound by the people I love, by the community around me, and by the God who walks with me along the path of life with its ups and downs, its twists and turns, its stops and starts.

The story of Jacob teaches us that it is not wrong to chart our own way through life. It is not about being wrong or right. It is about making choices, while at the same time recognizing the well-being of the community around us. It is about recognizing the hurt and pain and frustration, of taking responsibility for our actions, and where possible to make amends.

This kind of autonomy, the mature variety, does not come easily. To keep some sense of independence within community is like constantly wrestling with people, and God, and most of all yourself. And even if you win, it leaves you slightly limping.

May the teachings of Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit guide us as we live our lives to the fullest, while building community to the glory of God.

Let us pray:

Lord thank you for walking with us each step of the way, along the journey of life. Grant us wisdom as we exercise our autonomy within the common good of community. May our limping remind us of your abiding presence in the midst of the struggles of life. Make us winners for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.