

# **Sermon Text for April 17, 2016**

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James 1:19-21, Genesis 29:15-30

***“Lean Back and Kick Forward”***

We find ourselves today with Jacob after his dream of the ladder that was planted firmly on the earth and yet reached all the way to heaven and we were able to declare that this Jesus which we proclaim is the way the truth and the life, and no one gets to the Father except through him. But remember Jacob is on the run and he has been encouraged by his father to go and find a wife, and today we find ourselves at a place in Jacob's life where he is searching for a wife. Today it is not easy to find the right person who is going to be your best friend for life. I wonder if it was ever easier. But I'm guessing that many of you would be surprised by the number of weddings that I do where people have met through dating sights on the internet. Here is a great story of one couple that I was able to marry.

Okay, maybe Jacob wasn't looking at Christian tingle to find his spouse, but he was ready to be married and we find ourselves in a scene where he finds the person that he thinks God has put in his life. But when he gets a chance to speak to the father of the bride, we then find this historic clash between the new and the old. We find the age old intersection of we've never done it this way before and someone who is so forward thinking that they just might burn every bridge before they get to where they want. This applies not only in choosing a spouse, but also in our Christian life as we are encouraged to lean back and stay grounded and rooted in that which we have learned and which has been passed down to us and then kick forward to that which God has in store for us which none of us would ever be able to predict.

I'm guessing all of us at one time or another learned how to swing right? I'll never forget when daughter number 2, Naomi, learned how to swing. It was such an exciting time in her life. She would spend hours in our back yard in Florida just by herself swinging. That would carry over to when we moved to Russia and if Naomi had disappeared we could just look out of our window and see swinging away. But when she was first learning she didn't quite have it down pat. At the beginning she would kick her feet out at the top of her swing and sometimes she would do it at the bottom, sometimes she even forget to do it at all. But she was so happy she didn't care.

You know it took physicists a long time to figure out how the ideal art of swinging actually took place. They tried to mathematically calculate when would the best time to exert force in order to get the best swing. For the longest time they thought it would be if you exerted pressure at the very bottom of the swing. A physicist went to a playground and learned what every 3 year old knows. The best time to get a really good swing is at the top, when you reach the very apex of the swing what do you do? You lean back and kick forward and it is that motion that propels you forward.

Today we are going to learn what it means for us to lean back and kick forward as a church and as a people. We are going to lean back not just a few years, not just to when this church started but back through the renaissance, the baroque period, the middle ages, the dark ages, even further back than that. We are going to lean all the way back into the arms of Jesus Christ our Savior. Once we have leaned back there and are nestled and get our footing and feel the solid foundation, once we are at the top of that ark, then we are going to kick forward with all of our strength and move as a church in our mission, our ministry, and the work that Jesus Christ has entitled us with. As a church we are at the peak of our swing, the programs are running, the people are coming, but we need to kick forward in order to keep the momentum going.

Jacob is somebody who knew how to kick forward. He was someone who didn't necessarily always wait until he reached the peak of his swing before he kicked forward. In fact he was always striving after a future goal at all costs. Today's Scripture is actually a pretty funny story. Jacob continues to be a magnet for conflict. His relationship with Laban, his soon to be father-in-law is marred by this conflict. Jacob is the one who always knows what he wants and strives for it at all costs. He was the master of carpe manana, he seized his birthright, stole the blessing and now he has fallen in love and he will not stop at anything to have Rachel as his wife.

Think of the story. Here is Jacob working for his uncle for an entire month when all of a sudden his uncle states, you have been working for me for a month, maybe I should be paying you. What do you want to be paid? Jacob knew what he wanted, he wanted Rachel as his wife. Scripture steps in here and tells us some details that will cause some problems later on. Rachel was not the oldest daughter, her sister Leah was. Now Leah, Scripture tells us, had beautiful eyes, but Rachel was a knockout. Jacob knew what he wanted. He knew Rachel had to be a part of his future. Laban also was a forward thinking man and so he joins in what could be considered a battle for the future.

The seven years are over, Jacob demands his pay, Rachel, and Laban pulls the oldest trick in the book, the bait and switch.

Jacob wakes up the next morning and surprise, it was Leah. Now how do you handle this part of the story pastorally as Jacob the night before didn't even know if he was with his beloved or not? Surprise! There was nothing wrong with Leah, she had beautiful eyes, but Jacob knew what he wanted.

Did you notice the reason for why Laban did what he did? We don't do things that way around here. I know what you want, but around here we marry off the older first and then the younger. It would have been nice to know that 7 years ago, but culturally now the father has two problems solved. He was able to get rid of two daughters in one shot. Probably not the best way to put it, but that is what it really turned out to be. Laban was able to unload his daughters to one person. You see back then that was a big deal. Marrying off your daughters was a key step in the furthering of your family. It united families and now this bond with Jacob and his wealthy family would be sealed even more.

Now it would have been easier for Jacob at that point, or even earlier, to say, forget it. I'll go find my wife elsewhere. But he knew what he wanted, he was persistently kicking forward claiming the future as his own. He didn't let this bump in the road steer him off course, but rather he kept kicking forward and worked in all 14 years in order to be able to claim his wife as his own.

The current state of our nation is one of unparalleled disunity. Aside from the political fighting that is taking place, we are also very much mired down in anxiety and fear as a culture and even as world. It is hard to kick forward when you are fighting and filled with fear. It would be easier for us as a nation to slow down, to look for excuses not to kick forward. To go back to the good old days when things were gentler and kinder. The same could have been said for Jacob. But Jacob doesn't allow this move by his father in law to mire him down. He moves forward into the future.

But, be careful. We need to ask the question why was Jacob deceived the first time? The simple answer is that he was so focused on the future that he completely missed the present. There are two parts to the swing formula. The first is leaning back, slowing down, being able to appreciate the here and now, being able to feel grounded, respecting and understanding the tradition and the culture and the lessons learned from the past. All of this needs to take place before you kick forward. The only way that one

can feel grounded is what we read in James. If we are able to welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. We can be so bent upon the future that we miss the present marriage that we have with Jesus Christ. Without Scripture as, the implanted word and Jesus Christ who has saved our souls on the cross then all of our efforts will be in vain. James tells us to listen first and then move forward.

I was listening to NPR the other day and they mentioned now more than ever that people were searching for God. People are recognizing their vulnerability and that there is something greater than they are and that is called life and death. Then he said something that was very scary. He said people are not concerned about the substance of what they receive, but rather the form, how they receive it. People want the experience, and are willing to sacrifice the content in order to have the experience. We live in a world that is filled with believers. Belief is not a problem, the problem is not making people believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but rather that he was the only one. Leaning back and kicking forward is difficult in this world in which we live.

We live in a society that has more people watch the last episode of the Voice than who voted in our last general election. There are churches who feel that the only way to survive is by leaning back, and staying back. These churches are dying, but they are theologically sound. But nobody wants to hear their sound message because their form is dull and drab. There are churches that all they want to do is kick forward and provide form, but their substance is lacking. So like all things the grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of the Lord will remain forever. Our challenge is to be able to find that balance between leaning all the way into the arms of Jesus Christ our Savior and yet being able to kick forward, with that foundation, to reach this world for the lost.

I feel, and I have said this before, that we are living in a time that people are willing to believe if we would just send them the message. Our challenge is to get out there and tell people the message in a form that is enticing and yet that does not jeopardize the content. May God bless us as we continue to live in this world with all of its problems as Christians filled with joy and hope. Amen.