

Wrestling: With God, Others, and Oneself

Genesis 32:22-31

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Jacob wrestles alone all night long with 'man,' who we later learn is God (or perhaps an angel of God). Jacob will not let his opponent go until he gets a blessing. It comes, in part, in the receiving of a new name. From now on Jacob will be known as Israel. The struggle comes with a price, however. Jacob's hip is dislocated (or thigh bone is broken, or something like that) and he will henceforth walk with a limp.

The more research I did on this passage the more I came across biblical scholars who revealed how problematic and perplexing this particular story is on so many levels, stemming primarily from centuries and centuries of oral transmission. It's one of those great biblical tales that you can just imagine being told late at night, sitting by a fire, generation after generation.

So for today's sermon I've decided to set aside most of the scholarly debates and hit some of the high points of what this story might reveal to you and me. But first, **I need to begin with a bit of background of just who this Jacob really was.**

You may remember that he was the twin brother of Esau, sons of Isaac and Rebekah, grandsons of Abraham and Sarah. They were not identical twins, however. We're told that Esau, the older brother by a few minutes, turned out to be a rugged outdoorsman, like his father, Isaac; while Jacob exhibited the finer features of his mother, Rebekah.

Jacob spent the early part of his life tricking and cheating his brother, Esau, out of what was rightfully his as the firstborn son. At one point, Jacob manipulates Esau into giving up his entire inheritance, his birthright, simply for a bowl of porridge. Later on, with the help of his mother, he tricked his blind and dying father, Isaac, into thinking that he was his brother Esau in order to receive Isaac's deathbed blessing, which Isaac had intended for Esau, not Jacob. When Esau heard about how his brother stole the blessing that was rightfully intended for him he vowed to kill Jacob. So what did Jacob do? He ran away. He ran to the distant country of his uncle, Laban.

There, Jacob meets Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. In a way-too-long story for this morning, Jacob eventually ends up marrying both of them. After about twenty years in this distant country, Jacob finally decides he has to return to his homeland and face his brother, though he is still scared for his life. This brings us to today's passage.

In an apparently cowardly act, Jacob sends everyone else ahead of him, including his wife and children and all his wealth, in an attempt to appease Esau.

As it turns out, Jacob ends up spending the night alone along the banks of the Jabbok River, a tributary running into the Jordan River about 21 miles north of the Dead

Sea. Up to this point, **Jacob's life had been marked with occasions in which he manipulated, tricked, and cheated his way into receiving blessings. But on this night he had to wrestle and fight for a blessing all by himself, alone, without tricks or deception.**

The meaning behind this story involves a mysterious struggle between Jacob and God. Verse 30 states, "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'" After an all-night, no-holds-barred smackdown wrestling match, Jacob, though wounded, receives a blessing, and a new name. **Every time in the Bible when someone gets a new name it is a sign of a dramatic and enormous change within that person.** For instance, Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. In the New Testament, Jesus' disciple Cephas becomes Peter, which means rock, and Saul becomes Paul, the Apostle.

In our story, Jacob, the manipulator, trickster, and cheater, becomes Israel, the father of a nation. His 12 sons eventually becoming the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Now, what does all this have to do with us thousands and thousands of years later? Well if it's just a historical story, I suppose not much. But that's not how we approach Scripture. **I think we should approach this story like every other story we encounter in the Bible. And that means to not get wrapped up in the literalness of the story, but rather ask at least four basic questions:**

1. **What does this story say about God?**
2. **What does it say about us?**
3. **What does it say about our relationship with God?**
4. **What does it say about our relationship with each other?**

I am among those that still believe that God speaks to us through these ancient stories through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, as well as good, sound biblical scholarship. Therefore, the application of what we learn has implications for us both as individual believers, and as communities of faith.

So in order to apply this story to our lives, perhaps the most obvious question for reflection is: **What have you been wrestling with in your life lately?** Perhaps it's relationships, concern about a member of your family, finances, employment, health issues, loneliness, sexuality, addictions, depression, grief, anger, your reputation, or politics.

Perhaps you're wrestling with your own conscience or your 'shadow side' – the side that sometimes doesn't like other people, or oneself?

Or maybe you're wrestling with theology (your understanding of God) or even directly with God – that part of you that questions your walk with God, that may even wonder at times if there is a God?

Have you ever had trouble getting to sleep at night, or struggle getting back to sleep when you wake up in the middle of the night, because that seems to be the time when you do the most wrestling with things? I have. **Spirituality experts suggest that it's important to pay attention to what it is we wrestle with** in the middle of the night, or whenever it is we wrestle with things. **The unavoidable fact is that we all wrestle.** And sometimes the smackdown, drag-out fight can last for an entire night, or for a week, a month, a year, or even a lifetime before there is resolution.

It's important to note, however, that wrestling with something is different than merely having anxiety or fear about something. **Wrestling implies that there is something**

that needs to be struggled with, worked out, understood, or even changed – whether it be our perceptions, our attitudes or our actions.

Perhaps most importantly, did you notice that in this ancient biblical story **it is only at the end of the wrestling match when the blessing comes?** What can we learn from this? It's actually a fairly common theme in the scriptures: we need perseverance. **We must stick with whatever it is we are wrestling with. This story encourages us not to give up, for in the end there is a blessing.**

In this particular case, the blessing, in fact, is a direct result of the conflict. It came in the form of a new identity for Jacob. Now that doesn't mean that all blessings from God only come after conflict. But it does suggest that when we wrestle with whatever needs to be wrestled with, a blessing awaits. So perhaps, after a particularly difficult struggle in your life you (and I) may need to **be more intentional to recognize those resulting blessings.** Again, it is *after* the struggle that the turning point came in Jacob's life.

This biblical story goes on to reveal that he was given the courage to face his brother, Esau, and to seek reconciliation. After all, if he could face God and prevail, certainly he could face his brother, regardless of the outcome – good or bad.

As always, I believe there are **communal implications** in this story as well as personal ones. An important question that needs to be reflected upon is: **What are we wrestling with as a congregation?**

Most mainline churches in this day and age are struggling with **how to be perceived as relevant** in the midst of a culture that increasingly sees the church and organized religion as irrelevant. I know we here at College Hill continue to wrestle with **how to reach out to the neighborhood and beyond, especially to those who are often not accepted and received openly by other communities of faith.** How can we evangelize – share the good news – and continue to provide an environment that is an inclusive, safe place – a place of sanctuary and hospitality – that attracts all of God's rich diversity of people?

While these and more may seem like daunting challenges, they are also opportunities. Do we give up the wrestling match, or do we refuse to let go until the blessing comes – or more likely, continues to come. For in my estimation we are already richly blessed as a community of faith. Will we, like Jacob, recognize the very face of God in the midst of our struggles?

Today's biblical story from Genesis goes further than simply presenting life as a struggle. Our text concludes that struggle – even with God – ends with a blessing, even though one may limp on afterward with the scars of the battle.

His entire adult life, Jacob was on the run, making his way in life by less than honorable means. But now with his limp, symbolically, he can no longer run – run from his past, his fears, or himself. Perhaps this, in and of itself, was his greatest blessing. **For only then did Jacob find the courage to stop running and confront the things he needed to face. Likewise, may we all stop running and get in there and wrestle.** And don't be afraid to wrestle with God. Then, let us all wait for the blessing.

Amen.