

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for August 2, 2020 ~ Proper 13A

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Many people say that the story of Jacob's wrestling match, which was probably told over and over again in the Bedouin tents near the River Jabbok, is simply to explain how the Jabbok River got its name. One night, Jacob, had a wrestling match with God or an angel of God or his conscience on the edge of that river and ever since the river has been called "Jabbok", which means "Wrestle."

Other people say that the purpose of that story is to explain how Jacob got a limp. One night, Jacob wrestled with an angel of God and the angel wounded his hip.

Some people say this story attempts to explain how the great altar got built at Peniel. Jacob built an altar there to commemorate his wrestling match near the Jabbok River.

I believe the real meaning of the story is one of profound spiritual depth. One night, Jacob had a wrestling match with God, with an angel, with his conscience, and his life and legacy were changed forever.

Jacob's wrestling match is a story about spiritual maturity. Jacob had been cheating people his whole life. He had cheated his brother out of the inheritance, cheated his brother from his father's dying blessing, cheated his blind father; he tried to cheat his Uncle Laban. But Jacob had reached a point of spiritual maturity when he could no longer live as a schemer and cheater. In a dream, he heard the voice of God calling him to do something truly dangerous. It was something he probably knew he needed to do, but it could mean the loss of all that was precious to him and even cost him his life. God told Jacob, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth" (Genesis 31:13). He was spiritually ready to do what God wanted him to do.

St. Paul, in describing the various gifts given to the Church indicates that spiritual maturity is the point of the entire enterprise: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Jacob's wrestling match is a story about prayer. On that particular night beside the river, in that wrestling match, Jacob came face to face with God. Most of us know what it is like to toss and turn and find it hard to sleep when something is bothering us – a difficult decision, concern about our family, financial burdens, something troubling our conscience. Sometimes we intentionally turn to God in prayer in those moments. Sometimes, God intentionally turns to us, gets our attention, makes us mindful of the divine presence. There are other times when that happens besides in the night. But whenever we find ourselves in one of those kinds of situations, our prayer is a wrestling match in which our will is pitted against the will of God. Even Jesus had such a time in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Isn't it interesting that the new name God gave to Jacob was Israel? Since that time, the descendants of Jacob have used that name as their family name and eventually the name of their nation. Scholars disagree on the exact meaning of the name but the meaning that speaks to me is "God Wrestles." That really is the nature of prayer. The great God Almighty is willing to wrestle with us in our prayers until our wills are in

alignment with God's will, when our deepest desires are to see God's desires fulfilled in our lives on earth, as in heaven.

Jacob's wrestling match is a story about transformation. Any time in the Bible, when you get a new name, it is a sign of a dramatic and enormous change within that person. In the New Testament, Simon Peter was called a new name. Jesus said, 'You are Cephas but I will call you Peter and you will be the rock for that is the meaning of your name.' After an encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road, Saul, the persecutor of the early Church, became Paul the Apostle. Any time someone in the Bible is given a new name, it symbolizes an enormous change of inner character. And so Jacob underwent this enormous change from being Jacob to being Israel, from being a cheater, a manipulator, cunning, and clever, to being a person who finally let God rule in his life.

That is what the New Testament, Jesus and the Kingdom of God is all about. The kingdom of God is any place and any heart in which God reigns.

Jacob's wrestling match is a story about blessing. In that wrestling match, Jacob came face to face with God. Instead of punishing or destroying Jacob, God blessed him. God touched him in such a way that he was changed. The physical wound was the outward sign of the transformative inner blessing. God's blessing that was given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham was passed to his son Isaac. Jacob tricked Isaac into passing that blessing to him instead of Esau, the firstborn son. Now, Jacob/Israel had his own blessing from God. And when he passed the blessing on to the next generation, he passed it on to his twelve sons, the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans about his people, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever" (Romans 9:4, 5). The Messiah, of course, is Jesus Christ. And, when it was time for Jesus to depart, what did he do? He gave the disciples his blessing and the accompanying commission to bring God's blessing to the world. The blessing that was resident in *one* was transferred to the *many*.

He'd been preparing the twelve to carry on his work for a long time. Notice what he says to the disciples in Matthew's account of the feeding of the multitude: "When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; *you give them something to eat*'" (Matthew 14:15, 16). *YOU* give them something to eat. Of course, they responded that they didn't have enough. So Jesus told them to bring them what they had and when they did that, he blessed and broke and gave it back and there was more than enough. When you and I are called to go out into the mission field at our doorstep, to Fort Worth, to 4Saints Food Pantry, to the Union Gospel Mission, to Haiti, to Africa, to our neighbor in need, and we complain that we don't have enough, just remember that when our offering of what we DO have is placed in the hands of Jesus Christ, amazing things happen.

The Church does not have a mission, the mission has a Church. Jesus calls the Church to deliver a blessing to the world but he does not expect us to do it on our own. We have to place "our whole trust in his grace and love," to borrow the language of our Baptismal liturgy. Jesus Christ does more with us than we can do by ourselves.

Jacob's wrestling match is a story about reconciliation. Our catechism asks, "What is the mission of the Church?" and answers, "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." In other words, the mission of the Church is reconciliation.

Jacob was on his way to face his brother whom he had cheated. He sent all that was precious to him ahead as a peace offering, hoping against hope that he had heard God right and trusting in God's promise to do good for Jacob if he returned home. He was on a journey of reconciliation.

When the Church is on the path of spiritual maturity, pursuing the vocation of reconciliation, trusting God, we are able to release our grip on what is precious to us.

As he approached Esau, "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). That was the last thing Jacob/Israel expected! Esau wasn't the least bit interested in a peace offering. He was overjoyed to see his long-lost brother and moved to tears at his return. And then, the man who wrestled with God and said, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30), said to his brother, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10).

Jacob's reconciliation with God led to his reconciliation with his brother. He saw the face of God reflected in the face of Esau. Does that remind you of the question in the Baptismal Covenant, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" This is a story about reconciliation because reconciliation is about unity with God and others. We are never closer to God than when we are in the presence of another human being, created in God's image.

Recently, our 49-year-old son told us how he has always appreciated going with us 34 years ago in London to see the musical based on Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*. At the end of the musical, Jean Valjean, who is on his deathbed, with Cosette at his side, sees a vision of Fantine inviting him into the heavenly realm. And he sings to her:

*Take my hand
And lead me to salvation
Take my love
For love is everlasting
And remember
The truth that once was spoken,
To love another person is to see the face of God.*

That's what the Patriarch Jacob/Israel understood that day after his wrestling match with the God of Love when he looked into the face of the brother with whom he needed to be reconciled. It's what happened that day when the first followers of Jesus looked into the multitude of hungry faces. And it's what happens to us when, through our own spiritual maturing and prayerful wrestling, we come to recognize the face of God in the faces of those around us who need the blessing that has been given to us to share abundantly with others.