

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 11.18.18, Genesis 32: 22-31, Judges 6:11-24, Psalm 135: 1-7

Sermon Resources:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2132

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2804>

personal notes from Dr. Karoline Lewis' lecture, YCW Conference 2018, and from speakers at CREDO event 2018

<http://philoctetes.org/documents/Eliot%20Poems.pdf>

I told you a few weeks ago, when we heard the story of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing, that it was one of my least favorite stories. Well, we're on the flip side, now, because this part of Jacob's adventures is one of my favorite stories. In fact, back in July, when I was at the Young Clergy Women Conference, Dr. Karoline Lewis asked us to think of the bible story or character who best explained our personal theology, and I immediately thought of Jacob, specifically, of this story of him wrestling. It's so weird, and strange. It's simultaneously nebulous and concrete. It is astonishing and eerie. It offers us a lot to think about.

But before we can get into it, we need to catch up with Jacob since we heard from him last. And there's a lot to catch up on, because twenty years have passed since we heard about Jacob having a dream of a heavenly ladder and hearing God's promise. In those twenty years, he has gone to his mother's family in Haran, met his Uncle Laban, and his daughters Rachel and Leah. Jacob ends up marrying both Rachel and Leah, and working for his uncle, tending to his flocks. But Jacob is still Jacob, the supplanter, the grasper, the person we know has deceived before, and

gets what he wants. During that time with Laban, he managed through strategic tending, to increase his own herds and flocks, and to acquire many goods and provisions. Laban is equally tricky, and knows all this, so if we had more time, we could get into all the delightful back and forth of Jacob, essentially, meeting his match in Laban, and the tug of war between them. During that time Jacob also has a family, 11 children at this count, so he has wives, children, flocks, herds, servants, provisions, goods and wealth. And finally he decides he's had enough of this back and forth with Laban, he needs to go out on his own, and go back to his family—which the Lord promised him all those years ago.

So, he packs up his family, his flocks, his things, and they head back to Canaan. But Jacob is no fool. He knows that twenty years might not be enough time to soften a grudge like Esau would bear against him. He knows that returning to Canaan might mean returning to a death threat from his own brother. And, so, he sends a messenger to his brother, telling him hey I'm back in town...

Esau sends the messenger back to say: "he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him". Yikes. That sounds terrifying. And the text before this does say that Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. So, he sends his family, his flocks, and their goods across the river, and sends a bunch of presents to his brother, but he waits on the far side of the river, alone.

Which gets us to today's story. While he waits in the dark, someone appears and wrestles with Jacob all night long, and neither one can seem to get the upper hand, until whoever it is knocks Jacob's hip out of joint. Jacob's down, but not out, and he tells this wrestler that he's not letting go until he gets a blessing out of it. The wrestler asks Jacob his name, and Jacob tells him, and then he is given a new name: Israel—the one who strives with God. But when Jacob asks the same question, the wrestler refuses to give a name, and then blesses him. Jacob's response to

this encounter is to name the place Peniel, the face of God, because he says he saw the face of God there.

Now, you might have noted that I said “someone” wrestled, or “the wrestler”, because now when we think on this story, it’s usually labeled as “God” or “an angel”, but the text says “a man wrestled with him”, at first, it’s only at the end that Jacob describes this as an encounter with God. And, given that this is one of my favorite stories, it was fun to do research on it, because there are several different ideas about this story—the more common ones, that it’s God seeming like a human man—not a unique experience in scripture, this happens to Abraham, too; or that it’s an angel of God, which in scripture are often assessed as God—like in our story about Gideon. Other ideas are that it’s actually Esau come to wrestle Jacob in the night, or that it’s Jacob’s shadow side, his sins and demons coming home, wrestling with them before he can cross over, or some are very straight forward and say it was just some random man, wrestling with him.

It would be a wealth of sermons for me to explore each one of those, I’m going to stick with it being God seeming like a human man. And I’m choosing that because that’s how Jacob assesses it. The text says “a man wrestled”, but Jacob is the one who identifies this encounter as seeing the face of God. That’s his understanding of what happened here.

One of the things you learn in pastoral care class, is to start where the person is, whoever has come to you for care, start where they are. So, if they come to you and tell a story that you think well there might be more to it than that, or you think perhaps some greater compassion or understanding is warranted from this person in their situation, or whatever, that’s fine, but you wait. And you start where the person is, in their situation, their perception of it, their understanding of the story.

I’m giving Jacob the benefit of the doubt, that sure maybe it was just a man, or it was secretly Esau, or whatever, but Jacob stood up from that wrestling match,

his hip out of joint, newly named and newly blessed, and he understood it to be the work of the Lord. When he looked on the face of that wrestler, he understood it as the face of God, and yet had lived to tell about it. And, given the number of similar encounters in scripture, Gideon's today, for instance, it's not that strange to think that Jacob, waiting in the dark, encountered the Lord and wrestled for a blessing.

Jacob understands this to be God. He demands a blessing, because he's used to doing that, but when he gets the blessing, he sees the face of God, because he has already experienced God as a God of blessing. Twenty years before, when he lay in the dark, dreaming of a ladder, he heard about God's promise and blessing to him. He has experienced those blessings over the last twenty years. When the blessing comes, he senses the presence of God.

And part of the blessing is a new name, and this new name also helps tell him who he is dealing with: Israel, the one who strives with God, because he has striven with God and with humans, and has prevailed. His name is "the one who strives with God", the "God-wrestler" as commentator Wilf Gafney says. For Jacob, all signs point to this being an encounter with God.

So, then what does this encounter tell us about Jacob's relationship with God? What is it like? Well, like our psalm says, Jacob knows himself to be already chosen by God, claimed, and this just reiterates it. He comes into this situation not discovering new faith, but wrestling with faith, with a relationship, he already has. He is chosen, he is blessed, he is a child of promise, but he is wrestling in the dark, asking for more, holding on tight, striving. Jacob is chosen and blessed, but not passive in his relationship with God. He wrestles. He tries. He asks questions. He holds on tight.

Which may be a little different than what we've heard or been taught about faith. The majority of us here come, like Jacob, with faith, years of it perhaps, but maybe you learned that true faith, good faithful people, the blessed and chosen,

don't ask too many questions, never doubt, never wonder, that the best faith is peaceful and placid, certain and strong, like a rock, an anchor. If that is your faith, wonderful, and good, and possibly this message isn't for you, but maybe you can get something anyway. But maybe you heard all that, knowing that your faith sometimes is not solid as a rock, that you do wonder and doubt and ask questions, that being a person of faith in a tumultuous world isn't always peaceful or placid, maybe your faith is more like wrestling in the dark.

Jacob is my favorite because he's a messy person. He's a person who goes back and forth, sometimes he makes progress, and then sometimes he goes back to his trickster ways, he is someone who has faith, but also who hedges his bets, who doesn't just accept anything, but also trusts a God of ladders and far off promises. He's a person in awe of the fact that he saw the face of God in the dark, and yet also chose to wrestle that encounter of God and demand a blessing and ask for a name. Perhaps he's an image of faith we need to reclaim for our own unclear and troubled times. The idea that in our faith, our relationship with God, we can pursue God's promises and live in God's blessings, even if we are people who are messy, who question, who demand, who wonder, who wrestle.

And I think we ought to be those people, because we care about our faith, about our relationship with God. At my conference last week, one of the speakers said to a room full of pastors, but I think it's true of everybody, "Part of why you are frustrated is you care so much. If you didn't care, you wouldn't get frustrated". And he was saying this to pastors who care, who care what happens to our churches, to the people in the pews, to how you grow in faith, and react to problems, and engage in relationships with each other, and if we didn't care so much, we wouldn't get frustrated. If you didn't care what happens to your children, they wouldn't frustrate you like they do sometimes, if you didn't care what happens to our country, our society, it wouldn't frustrate you so much. But we do care, and so

we get frustrated, and more importantly, we do care, so we wonder, we question, we try, we strive, we wrestle.

Maybe in our faith, in our relationship with God, in our practice of religion and gathering as a church, like Jacob, we just need to try. Not be people of a passive practice of faith, a passive relationship with God, a passive community of believers. In fact, I think, it's an insult to our faith not to wrestle—for us to be so riled up about politics, to care so passionately about culture and society, to intensely love our families, to focus so much on day to day things and focus so much energy on the elements of church and fellowship and where we gather—but then with our faith and our relationship with God to say “okay, it is what it is”, and give up the fight, it is insulting. Because this something we should care about, something that should frustrate us sometimes, something we care enough about to wrestle with it, to strive, to try, to grab tight and hang on for the ride.

Now, I don't mean we're obligated to have a crisis of faith, to give up faith in order to do this. I don't think it means we have to be angry, or even have significant doubts. But I think even in certain faith, there needs to be trying, grasping something more, attempting something challenging, wrestling. Never to have engaged with the Lord, wrestled with our God and our faith, demonstrates that we don't care. But I think we do, we do care. So we will have to try, we will have to make effort, and strive, we will have to wrestle.

And we will each have to try, not just as a community. I can't offer the only challenge, the only chance to wrestle. And maybe you start small. Maybe you try and show up for parts of church life you never have before, maybe you participate in something you never have before, maybe you try a new way of looking at something, maybe you try to read or listen to something which challenges you, that you have to wrestle with, maybe you sit down and have a conversation or a meal with someone who is a challenge, that you have to try, that you have to wrestle with

your feelings. If we care enough about our faith, our relationship with the Lord, that relationship lived as the body of Christ here, if we care, then we take the time to strive with it, to try, to wrestle, and see what comes of it.

At my conference last week, one of our preachers used this quotation from T.S. Eliot: ““For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” And maybe that second part doesn’t hold true, but the first does—for us there is only the trying. If we aren’t trying in faith, striving with God, actively wrestling and grabbing hold of that faith, that relationship, then we are missing a vital part of our business here on earth. For us, there is the trying.

And maybe from that trying, that striving, that wrestling, something new will emerge. A new blessing, a new name, a new vision. Maybe we will emerge with even more secure faith. Maybe we’ll emerge with scars or wounds, but also with the sense that we and our faith are strong enough to wrestle, strong enough to care, strong enough to try.

Our faith is not just one thing. Yes, sometimes it is comfort and sweetness, lifted burdens and rocks of refuge. But sometimes it’s a wrestling match. And we ought not give up until we have experienced the blessing which comes from it, we ought to hold on tight to the Lord, we ought to try for deeper and greater understanding, we ought to wrestle for our faith.

Let’s not fear when questions and doubts and dark nights come. Let’s not let go and give up on our relationship with the Lord. Let’s not allow our faith to be the one thing we never fight for. Let’s wrestle in the dark times, let’s hold tight to our relationship with God, let’s strive with God. Let’s allow that striving to lead us to more mature faith, deeper blessings, new identities. Let’s allow that striving to change our daily practice of faith, our relationships here on earth. Let’s be those who strive with God, let’s be those who hang in there in the fight, let’s be those willing to wrestle in the dark. Amen.

