

The Power of Names
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Genesis 32: 22-30, 33:1-12

A young rabbinic student asked his rabbi, "Is the story of Jacob wrestling with God by the River Jabbok true?"

The old man put his hand on the young one's shoulder and said, "Of course it's true. It happens to me all the time."

If you've never struggled through a hard time;
or wrestled with doubt or indecision, identity or guilt;
If you've never stayed awake tossing and turning with worry or fear;
or prayed desperately for pain to end or for love to come back;
if you've never felt stuck in a horrible situation;
or worn down by trouble or worn out by grief;
if you've never wanted to yell and scream at God . . .
well, there's nothing in today's sermon that applies to you.

If that is NOT the case for you, then I'll give you a break today. A "get out of worship free" card... if you've never had to metaphorically wrestle in the dark, go ahead and make your way out of this meetinghouse. *[Pause]*

No one? Let the record show that we're all still here. With that in mind, let's take a moment to recall some of our own struggles, some of the ways we have struggled with adversity. *[Pause]*

Maybe what comes to mind for you is something that happened long ago:
a particular loss or setback,
a time of serious illness or deep despair,
a period of waiting and not knowing what would happen or how things would turn out.

Or maybe you're going through a hard time *right now*; and this is your hour of struggle.

If that's the case... Well, this story is just for you.

Jacob was on the run from his twin brother, Esau, having stolen both Esau's birthright and his blessing. Jacob was a liar and a cheat—and God loved him anyway. In a dream, God promised to always be with Jacob, that his descendants would fill the earth, and that Jacob would be a blessing to the world.

The thing is that while Jacob had been *blessed*, he hadn't really been *changed*. He awoke from his dream filled with gratitude and awe, but he continued to live for himself and use others.

Fast-forward 20 years and we see Jacob is the same con man he'd always been. His *circumstances* have certainly changed—he's now wealthy and has two wives, two concubines and 11 children—but his heart has not. If anything, he now claims God as an accomplice in his get-rich-at-someone-else's-expense schemes.

Now he is on the run, setting out with his family and livestock and slaves and everything he owns. It's quite an adventure (complete with a robbery, a chase, a daughter's deception, an unlikely peace, and some other exciting details we don't have time to go into), but finally he is brought to the moment when he must come to terms with his past. He must face the brother he had cheated so many years ago, the one who wanted to kill him.

So Jacob sends his servants ahead with gifts of livestock and slaves to let Esau know he's coming and that he wants to make amends. But the message his servants bring back is that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob—with an army of 400 men.

Well, this gets Jacob shaking in his sandals, and his desperate prayer for deliverance actually includes some humility and thanksgiving to God... for a change. His current situation doesn't really scare him into being a nice guy, however; when the going seems like it's about to get really rough, Jacob sends Esau more bribes (I mean, gifts) and then makes his wives and children go on ahead as the first wave to meet Esau and his army. What a guy!

Jacob is left all alone in the dark—and this is where things get *really* interesting. The story says it is a man who wrestles with Jacob until daybreak, but Jacob clearly believes he has wrestled with God. Some traditions say the wrestler is an angel, a messenger of God.

The story raises *a lot* of questions.

Why would God wrestle with Jacob?

Why play dirty by putting Jacob's hip out of joint?

If God was wrestling with a mortal, wouldn't God *win*?

And what is "winning," anyway?

Big questions. Important questions. And we could talk about them all day.

Instead, I want to invite you to come back now to your own wrestling matches—*your* struggles of the past or the present.

With whom (or what) are you wrestling?

What if you, like Jacob, believed that even in the struggle there are blessings to be had?

Would your attitude toward your situation change if you believed that it contained within it the seeds of healing and transformation?

The wrestler in the story demands his freedom—perhaps the match has come to a stalemate, perhaps because he's done with Jacob, or maybe because, in keeping with ancient tradition, the wrestler was some sort of nocturnal spirit that couldn't survive the light of day.

All of that is intriguing, but I want to suggest that one key to the story and to our *own* stories of struggle is Jacob's counter-demand.

Alone and afraid, injured and hurting, Jacob manages to look the wrestler in the face and say, "*I will not let you go, until you bless me.*"

What if *we* said the same thing to *our* challenges, to *our* fears—or to our inner demons, if you will: "*I will not let you go until you bless me.*"

Imagine looking at our anxiety or our loneliness or our sadness square in the face and saying: "*I know you're changing me, but I will not let you defeat me. I will not let you have your way until you heal my deepest wounds and take away my fears.*"

Imagine that: whatever the struggle is, whomever the wrestler may be in your life, what if the struggle contains within it a blessing that will change you? What if we were to look at some of the hardest, most painful times of our lives through the lens of the Jacob story? Is there a blessing in the brokenness? How has our wound, our loss or challenge marked our hearts in ways that ultimately shaped us for the good?

Now I want to be very careful here... I am not encouraging any one of us to deny life's difficulties or sugar-coat our struggles. Life is not that simple or neat, and denial is no way out. And I'm certainly not saying suffering in itself is noble or that we should endure it because it serves some higher purpose. That's a perverse view of how this all works.

What I'm trying to say is: Life will be hard at times, and we are likely to get hurt. But God is with us through it all, and by God's grace we can choose how we will live and respond.

Empowered by God's Spirit, we can live with open hearts and open hands... even in the face of pain.

With the support of a loving community and the power of prayer, we can live in faith... even in the midst of struggle and doubt.

It may be that in our moments of trial, when we want to let go and give up and run away, that we are on the verge of profound transformation and spiritual growth.

In what looks like one final power play, the wrestler asks Jacob his name. And so Jacob the wealthy patriarch is forced to declare who he really is: Heel (the literal Hebrew meaning of Jacob)—a taker, a supplanter, a cheat. But that's not the end of the story—just as humiliation, defeat, and even death are not the end of our stories.

"That's not who you are any more," the wrestler tells Jacob-the Heel. "From now on you will be called Israel, which means the one who strives with God, because you have wrestled with God and with life—and *you have prevailed.*" And as the sun began to rise in the sky, Jacob left that place, walking into his future with a holy limp, forever altered, never to be the same.

This story, as phenomenally bizarre as it is, has been one of my favorites for years. It speaks to who we really are, in our innermost being, as children of God. Jacob was given a new name, Israel. In baptism we, too, are given a new name, as God beholds us and names us as one who follows Christ.

If truth be told, we are each called by so many names, some of them good and affirming, many more not! It can be terribly difficult to believe that God chooses to call us by name. Names carry the power to limit and hurt, but they also carry the power to heal and bless.

Whatever our wounds, however deep our scars may be, we carry them into a future filled with promise. May we allow God's love to heal us—even through the darkest of times. May we learn to wear our wounds as signs of grace and reminders of redemption, but not allow them to be all that we are called to be. May we remember our true name: God's Beloved, Precious Child. Amen.