

“A LIMP AND A BLESSING”
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8
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Jacob was a man at the crossroads of his life. If you remember your Old Testament stories, you know that Jacob in his early days was not what one would call a model of either industry or integrity. While his brother Esau would go out every morning to tend the flocks and the fields, Jacob preferred to spend his days hanging around the tents with the women, doing not much. By conniving and manipulation, he managed to take from his older brother Esau both Esau's birthright and his father's blessing. And after he had stolen pretty much all that was important from his brother, Jacob fled into the wilderness to escape Esau's wrath. He went to stay with his kinsman Laban, fell in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel, but was tricked into marrying Leah, the older daughter, having worked seven years for the privilege. Some would call that justice for the one who himself was no stranger to dirty tricks. So Jacob worked another seven years for Rachel, and then turned towards home, hoping to reestablish himself and to make peace with Esau. As they neared the place where Esau and his family were camped, Jacob sent his wife and children to a safe place, and went off by himself to spend a night alone to prepare for the encounter to come.

So there he was again, alone in the wilderness, when a stranger came up to him and began to wrestle with him. All night they struggled until the dawn was breaking. The stranger touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint, but still Jacob would not give in. The stranger pleaded to be let go because the morning light was upon them, but Jacob said to him, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And the stranger blessed him, changed his name from Jacob to Israel, and Jacob went on to face his brother and his life, a man with a limp and a blessing, a new name and a new life.

So that's the shorthand version of the entire Jacob cycle of stories in Genesis. And I review it all with you this morning because it's important to see Jacob's wilderness encounter in its whole context, for this moment, this sacred struggle is the crescendo, the high point of all the stories that speak both of the formation of the man Israel and of the people Israel, and the heart of this foundational story of our faith lies equally in Jacob's limp, his blessing, and his name.

Let me start with the limp. Jacob's all-night wrestling match is a metaphor for faith, and the first thing we learn about the Genesis storyteller's vision of faith is that faith always comes at a cost. Seeing the face of God, knowing God, it doesn't come for free. Jacob "wins" the wrestling match with the mysterious stranger, but he is marked forever by it. For all of his new life as Israel, he will walk with a limp.

Some of the old rabbinic commentaries say that Jacob's limp was because he now walked with one foot on earth and the other in heaven. I like that image. Because the fact is that when we align ourselves with God, commit ourselves to be God's people on earth, we are changed. The cost may be that we give away more of our money or more of our time or both. It may be that with one foot in heaven and one on earth, we get ourselves into trouble with the powers and principalities of this world. Two weeks ago, for example, John Thomas, president of the UCC, and Linda Jaramillo, our national minister of Justice

and Witness ministries, got themselves arrested outside of the White House. They were standing by the White House gate holding stacks of petitions with 60,000 names on them calling for an end to the war in Iraq. They stood by the White House gate because their earlier, through proper channels, requests to meet with someone in the Bush administration had been refused. When they wouldn't leave, they were arrested, handcuffed, and taken to jail. Now we may agree or disagree with their action, but whatever we think of it, we need to know that for them it was an action of faith. It was a cost they felt they had to pay to be God's people. And whatever the consequences, no matter how it might cause them to limp for a day, or a month, or however long, for them it was necessary if they were to stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven.

All of us here know the ways in which our faith has cost us—sometimes small, sometimes not so small—but we pay the cost because alongside of it comes to us a sense of blessing. How does your faith bless you? Is it in the quiet calm of prayer, or the joy of a faith community that holds you close in celebration and sadness? Is it the call to action that strengthens your wobbling knees and gets you out the door? For me, more often than not, the blessing of my faith is in reading these old, old stories of the Bible, and feeling the resonance of them in my heart, the comfort and steadfastness of the great cloud of witnesses who through centuries of our scripture proclaim that God is, and God cares, and that through all that life brings, even to persons as imperfect as Jacob or myself, we can become better, more compassionate people. The blessing we receive becomes the blessing we give. The story of Jacob moves on after his desert wrestling match with the stranger, but there is a dramatic shift that comes here. Before this night of struggle, everything Jacob gained came at cost to another. After he became Israel, whatever gain that became his became the gain of the whole community as well. A blessing received, a blessing given, and so it should be with the people of God.

There is both cost and blessing to those of us who choose God. But what I love most about this text is that in Jacob's struggle with the mysterious stranger—the one referred to as a man, but one who had the power both to touch Jacob's hip and make him limp, and also to extend God's blessing—in that wrestling match, Jacob receives a new name: Israel. Israel means “the one who struggles with God.” All week long, the relevance of that name has struck me. There are those who would define faith as belief, or a system of specific beliefs, proclaiming as sacred doctrine this or that particular truth. It's one of the things that turn many people away from the church, from being people of God. They think that to be part of a Christian church they must believe absolutely in the virgin birth, or have a full-blown understanding of the resurrection or salvation or the meaning of the trinity. The writer of Genesis doesn't see it that way. To be a person of God, to be part of the community of God's people, is not to assent to an understanding of particular truths, but instead to consent to struggle with God with our whole selves, to wrestle with God's intentions and God's commandments, wrestle with God's justice, and God's compassion. To be the people of God is to be willing to struggle again and again, when we are strong, when we are weak, and when we are hurting from the pain in our hip, from the beginning of our days until their end. And if we do that faithfully, then and only then will we gain the limp that comes from having one foot on earth and one in heaven, the blessing that moves out from us to all we touch, and the name that marks us as those committed to be God's people in our time and place. Thanks be to God. Amen.

