

Wrestling with God

By

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from the pulpit of
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Genesis 32:22-32

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' ²⁷So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' ²⁸Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Our second lesson this morning takes us once again inside the complicated family system of the biblical patriarchs and the life of Jacob. Last week we heard about all of the trickery around his marriages to Rachel and Leah, but today's story is deeply connected to Jacob's own legacy of deceit.

You may remember that while Jacob and Esau are twins, because he is just minutes older than Jacob, Esau is expected to be the inheritor of the family name and blessing. In two different instances Jacob tricks Esau into relinquishing that sacred and precious inheritance, and after the second he is so fearful of the wrath of his brother that Jacob flees to his uncle Laban's for protection and to start his new and prosperous life in a new land.

And prosper he does for years until his flocks and children are numerous. Through the complicated process of finally separating his family and his wealth from Laban's household, Jacob is faced with the inevitable need to reunite with his brother Esau, who himself has gone on to build his own family and fortunes. We read that Jacob is incredibly anxious about a reunion with Esau, and he prepares his company for a violent and devastating attack by the aggrieved older brother. He prays to God for protection: "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children."

Jacob sends an abundant peace offering ahead to Esau and then makes preparations for this last night before they meet up after years estranged from one another. It is here that the story of Jacob's confrontation with a mysterious man takes place.

Avis Clendenen and Troy Martin, Catholic scholars writing at the intersection of philosophy, psychology, theology, and biblical studies came together about 20 years ago to write a compelling book on the act of Forgiveness. What made this book unique in its time was their proposition that one of the essential acts to a real experience of forgiveness and reconciliation was the act of confrontation. Responding to a trend in Christian communities encouraging believers to move quickly to forgiveness as a sign of faith, they recognized that the work of forgiveness is too complicated and too important to rush.

They write: “Confrontation is an “art form” and a human relationship skill. Striving to live and love authentically will inevitably include the need to confront another in a relationship of consequence. Fearing all forms of confrontation as interference and aggression serves only to deepen relational rifts, not heal them.

Confrontation is the capacity to take one another seriously enough to come into each other’s presence as wounded and wounder. Confrontation involves a mutual facing into painful emotions because of the love and the desire not to lose the relationship to the fracture forever. Confrontation in interpersonal relationships of consequence assumes that the hurt does not necessarily have to be the final word in a relationship once experienced in confidence and trust.

Sincere and well-prepared acts of confrontation hold the possibility of setting the stage and creating the condition for metanoia - a change of attitude, understanding and heart. This change is essential to the process of forgiveness.”¹

For some traditional Biblical scholars this story of Jacob wrestling with an unidentified man is all about change. In this moment Jacob’s given name - which can be translated literally as trickster, changes to Israel - which is typically translated as God preservers. It is a story told to teach the people of Israel where their name originated and what it means for them to struggle and to preserve in this world.

For more contemporary scholars this story is also about change, but as Clendenen and Martin describe it - a change that is the result of two parties in a relationship of consequence confronting one another in order to repair the relationship. It is no coincidence that this confrontation - this wrestling match - happens right in the middle of this epic moment of confrontation and hopeful reconciliation with Esau.

¹ Avis Clendenen and Troy Martin. *Forgiveness: Finding Freedom Through Reconciliation*. The Crossroad Publishing Company. 2002.

The text is rather vague when it comes to the identity of this man, as though the narrator doesn't want us to know too much about what exactly is going on here.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of his identity in this way: "The power of the stranger is as much in his inscrutability as in his strength. Jacob anticipates the wrath of his brother. But first he must face an assault from the deity. In the middle of the night, the forms merge and overlap. Perhaps in pondering this scene, the narrator too, could not make out the forms very well. He could not discern whether the adversary is God or Esau. Surely there is more than Esau at work here. But it is not without reference to Esau. In the night the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day."²

I think we have all been there. Maybe not physically wrestling an anonymous angel on the banks of a river, but instead wrestling in our hearts and minds in the darkness and silence of the night. Wrestling with our mistakes and our guilt, wrestling with the reality that we have hurt someone we love, that we have damaged a relationship, that maybe because of carelessness, thoughtlessness, greed, or ambition, we have not been our best selves, and we wonder what it means to try to be better, how we might repair what we have done, and are we capable of being changed because of it.

Who is it that we wrestle with in those 3:00a.m. moments of painful clarity? It's not just our own conscience, but rather an overwhelming combination of our own regret, the expressions of grievance whether spoken or unspoken from those who we have wounded, and no small measure of our God moving within our hearts and minds attempting to create that change - that metanoia that just might help to repair what has been broken.

Jacob - alone in the dark - left with nothing but to wrestle with the consequences of the worst thing he had ever done.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*. John Knox Press. 1982.

I assume that many of you have already seen or are planning to go and see Christopher Nolan's new film, *Oppenheimer*. Just in case you have been on a media blackout this summer, it is an adaptation of the book *American Prometheus* written by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, that tells the story of Robert Oppenheimer, one of the leading scientists on the Manhattan Project who spends the second half of his life after the invention of the atomic bomb, wrestling with the consequences of not just the lives lost in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but of ushering in the nuclear arms race that followed.

The movie begins in his early years as a physicist with him wrestling literally in the darkness of the night with the new insights he was developing around quantum mechanics - haunted by both the deep recesses of space and the deep infinity of the atom. Nolan does a remarkable job of conveying that all-consuming experience of being inside his mind.

It is only after he builds upon the blessings of his intelligence and his charisma to the inevitable creation of the first weapon of mass destruction, that those nightmares of physics are replaced by nightmare of conscience - and the film does a seamless job of replacing one with the other. He quickly realizes that his hope that displaying the devastation of a weapon of this kind would lead to an end to war will instead risk the end of the world.

In a lecture in 1947 Oppenheimer described the weight of his conscience:

“Despite the vision and farseeing wisdom of our wartime heads of state, the physicists have felt the peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons, as they were in fact used, dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.”³

³ Oppenheimer. *Physics in the Contemporary World* (1947)

It's hard to even imagine what forgiveness would have looked like for Robert Oppenheimer - but the consequences of the ways that his wrestling changed him are a devastating reminder of how unsettling a genuine change of heart and mind, a change of conscience can be to others. The change he experienced and his search for absolution was not lauded by the powerful as a product of wisdom and growth, but interpreted only as weakness and disloyalty.

The change that Jacob experienced that night was more than his name. While the Bible does a remarkable job of describing the human experience, because of its ancient context it often struggles to describe the inner complexities of the mind, certainly not like we can in cinematic storytelling today. So, we don't have a declaration from Jacob of his metanoia - his change of heart and mind. He offers no sentiment of regret even when confronted by God. But the narrator wants us to know that Jacob's change was more than skin deep, and so he is struck in the hip and left with a permanent limp - a change, a reminder that if we struggle and if we are paying attention, if we are willing to change our behavior, our orientation, our way of being in the world, that restoration and forgiveness are on the horizon.

That next morning Jacob looks up to the horizon and sees Esau approaching him. After prostrating himself before his brother, Esau runs to meet him and pulls him into a deep embrace, and the two brothers weep in each other's arms. Jacob offers his brother more presents and Esau puts him off, confused by his extreme generosity. And then we have the only indication that Jacob himself understands that what happened to him the night before has led him to this moment of joyful reunion - "If I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God - since you have received me with such favor."

The wounds that we have inflicted, the relationships that we have broken, the confrontations that we cannot avoid, the changes we are challenged to make, the restoration that is just on the horizon - they can be personal, familial, institutional, communal, and even national as we consider our collective brokenness and need for metanoia.

When I think about what happens in this story between these brothers, between their families, between God and these men who he has blessed and the nation that they will become, I am really struck by that phrase that Clendenen and Martin used in that little book on forgiveness - *relationships of consequence*. Relationships that are worth fighting for, worth wrestling to redeem, worth making a change in ourselves, in our lives, in our community to repair.

As people blessed by God, we are called to recognize the face of God in that difficult work as individuals and as the Body of Christ.

As people who believe that our relationship of consequence rests in the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, we are called to be willing to reflect that grace and forgiveness to others when we share the ways that we have been wounded and when we admit to the ways that we have wounded others.

As people committed to do all of this work bound to one another in this collective relationship of consequence, we are called to be open to one another, to be honest, to even maybe be knocked a little out of joint, and to recognize that when we do the work, change is in fact a sign of wisdom and growth. So that we might be faithful and worthy inheritors of the blessing and responsibility of being Christ's church in this time and place.

Amen.