

“Holding Onto God”

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Genesis 32:22-31 + Jacob wrestles with God

Jacob was headed to a reunion – a reunion he dreaded. He looked with fear and trembling to this reunion with his brother Esau.

Since he had cheated his brother not once but several times and fled just ahead of Esau’s righteous wrath, Jacob had grown rich, fat and happy. In the intervening decades the trickster had himself been tricked, the swindler had himself been swindled. He had changed. He had mellowed and matured, but did that make any real difference? Jacob wondered, “Is Esau still out to kill me? He certainly was when I left! If I were him, I would murder me on sight – with good reason!”

He could not sleep at all. He sent all his worldly goods and possessions, all his family ahead across the river Jabbok. Maybe that would impress Esau. Maybe Esau would relent. Jacob was completely alone with his thoughts, his fears and his regrets.

Ever been to a reunion? Ever fear it like Jacob? I have not ever been to a college reunion out of dread and remorse. Nor a Seminary one as well for the same reasons. My high school years had been so painful, and I dreaded meeting anyone from home so much that I chose to miss the 10th and 20th reunions of my high school. But like Jacob my namesake, memories began to mellow



after twenty five or so years and the first one I went to was the thirtieth. Consequently as I dreaded, I ran into a number of people that I had wronged.

There was Susan Wilson. At day camp in junior high, in high spirits I had thrown a kind of giant acorn at her from the front of the church bus. No one else was around and when I knocked her glasses off, it seemed certain I had broken them and probably hurt her eye badly. Like a coward I ran, not waiting around to give aid or find out what harm I might have done. Her mother was our school librarian and leader in our church. I scrupulously avoided going into the library and having to face Mrs. Wilson for the next few years. Which as it turns out was simply stupid of me.

This was still chewing on me decades later when I was a pastor in Dallas, and Susan Wilson a Christian educator at a congregation in Waco. We had lunch one day and I apologized profusely for that wrong I had done her so many years before. It was easy to forgive me – she did not even remember the incident! No harm, no foul. She had totally forgotten it because no harm had come from it. It had been chewing on me for decades and for no reason. If I had only the courage to seek forgiveness sooner it would have saved me years of unnecessary turmoil.

Have you had similar experiences? I have had similar experiences many times – of something regretful I have done and dreaded to face the anticipated consequences – something praying on my mind and draining my spiritual reserves but which in fact has already been resolved – only I have not the courage to seek out the person to seek forgiveness.



One of the cardinal signs of maturity in both life and spirit is to be able to give and receive forgiveness. This is step nine in a twelve step

program's road to spiritual maturity – to seek out those we have wronged and those by whom we been wronged and to mutually forgive.

By that measure most of us are moral midgets – we harbor and savor hurts rather than seeking and giving forgiveness. This unforgiving spirit has consequences, real deep and enduring consequences. Inability to be forgiven and to forgive eats at our souls and robs us of joy, resulting in these many common afflictions:

- alienation, self-doubt, self-righteousness and low self-esteem (which are correlated), preoccupation with trivia, anger and withdrawal, lack of creativity and innovation, poor health, unhappiness, guilt, fear, depression, and suffering

Sound like anyone you know? Jacob had all of these. I know others who do as well. In addition among relationships like Jacob and Esau had, a spirit of unforgiveness results in yet other afflictions:

- separation, conflict, blame, avoidance, distrust, efforts to control, efforts to punish, frustration, anger, tension, judgmental attitudes, disharmony, agitation, disappointment, defensiveness and inauthentic behaviors.

Once these have set in and with Jacob they certainly had, once these have set in returning to authentic living takes more than some effort – it requires an intervention by God.

Jacob was completely alone with his thoughts and Scripture says:

“a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

A man? The artists following Christian tradition depict this man as an angel, a messenger from God, although that is never stated in the text – just ‘a man’ it says explicitly. Yet Jacob himself states that this ‘man’ is God in



the flesh face-to-face. The text is open and ambiguous. Who was this mysterious figure? Could it be Jacob's own guilty conscience that he wrestled with all night? Or is it Jacob's better nature? Do we know? Do we really need to know? The best answer, the only answer is: "all of the above."



Jacob – when the climactic moment comes, the very next morning when Jacob meets his brother, *Esau forgives him*, indeed has already forgiven him. Yet back at that long dark night of the soul, Jacob was not ready for it, not ready to receive it. First he must come to terms with self, overcoming guilt and shame, actually forgiving self. Such transformation always involves

wrestling with this man / angel / God / whoever it is in this story.

Jacob has two natures: the old con man, bitter and soul-shriveled, swindler of his brother, trickster. But he had improved, grown up some, he had developed another side. Laban tricks and swindles Jacob! He figures out what motivates Jacob and uses that to cheat him out of fourteen years of service – just as Jacob had used what motivated Esau to cheat him. Jacob has seen the world from both sides now, as giver and receiver of pain, on the giving end and on the receiving end of cheat.



This would have been a completely different story had Jacob reacted with anger and run away when Laban married him off to Leah instead of Rachel. Instead he quickly relented and indentured himself to Laban for seven more years. Scripture relates that the seven years “**seemed to**



him but a few days because of the love he bore for [Rachel].” He learned patience and self-control and most important he learned to forgive those who wronged him. He learned love. And God prospered both Jacob and Laban.

On a dark, moonless night by the Jabbok, God intervenes in Jacob’s life. God’s intention is to wrestle the old nature out of Jacob and confirm the new and better nature. It is a knock-down drag-out fight. It is a stalemate until dawn. Jacob’s old, self-centered nature is holding its own until God gets the upper hand and wounds that old nature giving the better side of Jacob the advantage and transformation is complete.

Thus a new name fit for his new estate: no longer Jacob the “heel biter” now his name is henceforth Israel, “God rules.” Just so his new life is ruled by God not by his old weak, sinful self.

There are two natures in each of us as well. God is always contending with the one to elevate the other. The Bible is emphatically *not a self-help manual*. Nowhere is this more apparent than Jacob at the Jabbok. We are not capable of helping ourselves – Scripture is all about God helping us, molding us, changing us, making us, transforming us – certainly not about each of us doing it for ourselves.

There are a number of life circumstances which hold us back and which God tries to wrestle out of us – or more accurately God tries to wrestle our reactions out of us and to mold us to the good in our nature. The list of those facing us each day are: everything from the bully on the school bus to discovery that that quiet child is actually autistic, to loss of job, loss of home, loss of partner and worst discovery of a fatal disease and loss of life after a long debilitating illness. Resignation to any or all of these contends against God, contests our entrance into the kingdom.

We get some of the flavor of this in Paul Gauguin's "*Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling the Angel.*" There are two figures fighting in the upper right while a crowd of women newly emerged from worship watch, the sermon ringing in their ears – some engaged in prayer, some engaged in the struggling figures. A stream separates them from the action and a cow on this side of the stream represents their daily life with God's purpose in a permanent state of breaking in. The women know that their own fate hangs in the balance of what is happening across the stream.¹



So here we are watching God's dramatic power to change us each one, to change the ground under our feet, even our very names and our purpose and direction in life. The scene insists that we remember this event as an event not just in the far distant past but as an event in our lives each day. Transformation of our weak, fearful selves is not only possible, but in God's plan, it is inevitable – if we let God win! How many of us truly get that?

Growth is hard. Transformation is painful. In nature, all growth necessarily involves change, and change is always difficult even the organic change implicit in living beings, plants and animals. How much more spiritual growth? So Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God have taught us.

Transformation is a necessary condition for growth. Indeed, change both outward and inward is a necessary condition for spiritual growth – if we are uncomfortable with change we are not going to grow. We know this yet our spirits resist this with all our heart, mind and strength. In our inward selves we would prefer to grow spiritually without being



stretched and prodded and poked and molded by a loving and fearful God. We don't like the 'fearful' part but that is the part that confronted the scoundrel Jacob at the fords of the Jabbok. That's the part which wants to squeeze the weak and sinful parts out of us.

For God to transform us is always a possibility – if we let God transform us – if we have a knock-down-drag-out with God and God wins.

Jacob wrestling with God is clearly the inspiration for one of John Donne's "*Holy Sonnets*" best known by its first line:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.²

Last Sunday we discovered that our prudence does not get us into the kingdom of heaven. We have to overcome our very natural reluctance to commit fully and freely to God without reservation in order to enter God's kingdom. Our human ways of thinking so limit us and keep us out.

This Sunday in taking up Jacob's wrestling with God we move from *prudence* to *perseverance*. In this story, as alien and illogical as it seems, we see our God acting completely outside the box to transform us.

We want our God to be gentle and reasonable, never a frightening sumo wrestler – but here we see the true God of all creation coming to us in a completely unexpected way.³ Other gods promise more for much less without any guesswork. However this God of all creation, whose name is yet unrevealed, this true God requires nothing less than everything, a total commitment. This God cannot be bought off with a few offerings, a mere part of ourselves.

Our encounters with the true and living God are not predictable, are never on our own terms, as much as we would like them to be. We would prefer to deal with lesser gods who give us less but demand less from us in return – false gods who are never scary or hurtful.

Every day we prefer to substitute these safe and sane gods for the real and living God. Yet encounters with the true and living God are unpredictable in time, place, duration and demands. Jacob's prayers are answered not with safety and easy answers but with the fearful presence of a totally undomesticated and untamable God.⁴

When we encounter God and God places demands on us, when God calls us, the best we can hope for is to hang on with what little strength we have, insist on a blessing to go along with the wounds and to limp home.⁵ The effort is greater but the reward is so much greater again. Never be satisfied with less than the real thing – authentic transformation – the real blessing of the one true God.

A pastor writes that when she thinks of people who have persevered, have held onto God despite everything, she immediately thinks of one woman whose marriage survived a series of betrayals by her husband.

“She told of discovering the betrayals and of all the rage and fear and sorrow and guilt that followed. Instead of giving up, she and her husband held on through painful marriage counseling and a slow rebuilding of trust. Years later, they seemed like the perfect couple, two people in a loving relationship that was a model of mutual care and understanding.”

The pastor was in awe just to hear her speak. “How did you ever get past the pain?” she asked.

“I didn't. The scars are still there, but that's OK. They remind me of how strong



this relationship really is and what we've been through.' Jacob never got past the pain either. For the rest of his life, he limped as proof of the high cost of holding on to God. But that [too is] part of the blessing."⁶

To ever give up in this life long fight is to lose whatever blessing God has in store. We need to believe with unshakable confidence that God loves us enough to wrestle us into the kingdom.

So hold onto God. Hold onto God like your life depends on it – it does! No matter what. No matter how. No matter whatever circumstances life may throw at you. No matter how strong 'the opponent.' No matter how bad it gets. No matter when it all hits – even in the dark of night. Hold onto God – and gain the true blessing God has in store for all children of God.



¹ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre “Lesson and the Arts” *Lectionary Homiletics* 31 July 2005, p.76

² John Donne “Holy Sonnet 14”

³ Barbara Brown Taylor “Striving with God” *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Crowley Publications, 1995) pp. 107-114

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Shawnthea Monroe, “Living the Word” *Christian Century* 26 July 2011, p. 22