

## **The Blessing of Struggle**

Genesis 32:22-31

July 31, 2011

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When 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.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

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Last week George Fritze read us part of Jacob's story in a piece of scripture that I chose not mention in my sermon. You remember Jacob. He was the second twin born to Isaac and Rebekah. His brother was Esau. Jacob was a trickster - that is actually what his name means, "trickster." Jacob was the one (with the help of his mother, Rebekah) who tricked his brother and his father Isaac into giving him Esau's birthright.

That didn't leave Esau too happy - so Jacob fled to a new land with his inheritance. A few good investments and two wives later (there was the passage that George read last week...), after all of that Jacob heads back to the land of his birth. Our passage for this morning takes place just before Jacob will meet his brother Esau; a meeting that has Jacob worried, for he does not know if distance and time have helped his brother's anger.

With these details of the story, listen with me for the word of God...

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At my last church in Richmond, Virginia, we would always start our confirmation classes at the Jabbok River. Okay, it wasn't *actually* the Jabbok - it was a creek that ran through a public park in the city. But we would gather there - usually on a very cold and windy Friday afternoon in February - with the pastors on one side of the creek and the parents and confirmands on the other.

One by one, we called the teenagers by name to leave the comfort of their parents and cross the Jabbok in order to wrestle a blessing from God as they made the faith of their baptism their own through the process of confirmation. Once all the teenagers had crossed the river, we went away with them for a weekend retreat where we started to explore what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. Those retreats were terrific - if only because of the honest questions the confirmands would ask about their faith. You know, those questions that don't have answers. The kinds of questions those teenagers will still be asking 30 years from now when they are the ones bringing their children to be confirmed in the church.

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A couple years ago, Kenda Creasy Dean (a professor of youth ministry at Princeton Seminary) wrote a book called *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. In her book, Dean draws heavily from the work of sociologists who interviewed and studied thousands of teenagers as a part of the National Study of Youth and Religion.

The study describes what the sociologists call an “alternative faith” that has emerged among many teenagers in our churches. They describe it as “Moral Therapeutic Deism.” Through their study, they found similarities among what teenagers believe; a “creed,” if you will. The “creed” of MTD goes something like this:

- A God exists who created the world and watches over the earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Dean goes on to say that the Youth Study believes that most teenagers “tend to view religion as a ‘Very Nice Thing’ – meaning that religion may be pleasant, even beneficial, but does not ask much of them nor concern them greatly. As far as this study can tell religion wields very little influence in their lives.”<sup>1</sup>

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It’s not an easy thing to hear. Yet, in our effort to want the faith to have *more* influence, there is temptation to make it as easy, and clear, and simple, and as unambiguous as possible. I’m not just talking about those churches “out there” (though certainly, there are plenty of churches who fit the bill); I’m talking about the way we talk about the faith in here.

For example, every time I step into this pulpit to preach from these scriptures, I am tempted to “just boil the message down and say what it means.” When I visit the bedside of someone who is sick, or go to lunch

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this information is gleaned from an article that Dr. Dean wrote in the *Christian Century* last year called, “Faith, Nice and Easy.”

with someone who has lost their job, I am tempted to tie things up with a neat little bow and say that everything is going to be alright. When I teach a Sunday school class and am asked a tough question, I am tempted to try to *resolve* the issue by giving a satisfactory answer.

But that's not life.

And it is not faith, either.

Faith – or, as Kenda Creasy Dean would call it, a “consequential faith”...what she sees as the antidote for Moral Therapeutic Deism and the kind of faith that teenagers yearn for and need – this faith is not forged by a multiple choice approach to Christian education or by a church demanding that everyone read off the same sheet doctrinal music; it is forged by a willingness to struggle, and to wrestle with the God who is at the center of our life and our faith.

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When you think about it, the history of Christianity is remarkable. I find it remarkable that, some 2,000 years after his death and resurrection, the number of people who profess Jesus Christ and Lord and savior continues to grow. There are lots of reasons for this, but, I believe, one of those reasons is that the character of our faith is resilient.

Resilient enough to *matter* throughout centuries of change. Resilient enough to be *interpreted* through the ever-moving context in which the gospel takes shape. Resilient enough to *trust* that whatever shape the faith takes in future generations, the God who was and is at the center of the faith **will still be at its** center.

As stewards of the gospel, we have a role in nurturing this kind of resilient faith. I think as Presbyterians, we are set up well to promote it. Our tradition encourages active wrestling – with the scriptures, with God, with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. When it comes to saying what we believe, our practice is to confess that belief; not subscribe to it. That doesn't make it any less true – but it leaves room for God to act and it leaves room for us to engage.

Beyond the wisdom of our theological tradition, I think each one of us has a role to play in nurturing a resilient faith in our youth and our children (and

one another). We do it by sharing our struggles. Not by hiding them away as things to be embarrassed about; but by trusting each other – and God – to wrestle openly with our questions of faith.

Your big question about God, or the Bible, or how to live out your faith in the midst of a changing world is not a question in isolation – it is shared.

Your experience of helplessness, or hopelessness, or fear is not only your own – it is shared.

And to share it with others within the community of faith brings – perhaps not answers – but blessing because those struggles are real; and they matters.

People can spot authenticity, you know; teenagers especially. What a gift our church could be if we were known as community that asked authentic questions about the faith in the midst of authentic Christian community. I can't think of a better witness for the people of our city who are searching for a connection with God that goes beyond what is "easy."

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Of course, because of the scriptures, we know that committing to this kind of faithful wrestling will take its toll. At the end of the night, Jacob emerged, not only with a blessing, but with a new name and a new limp. A new identity and a new perspective. A rich history and a hopeful future.

So it is with those who strive with God and with humans only to prevail...