

sermon-7/31/11 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Limping Into a New Life”  
Genesis 32:22-31

My best friend, Doug, is a psychologist in Oregon. One of his specialties is working with folks who have ALS. It is a devastating disease, as you know, and his time with those people is often very poignant. One of his clients had a lot of theological questions and wanted to discuss them. Doug thought of me and asked if I would be willing to be in communication via email with this man discussing his questions. I said I would be honored to play that role.

A couple of weeks ago I received my first email. This man was a chief financial officer in his company before he had to retire. He is very bright, and basically an agnostic. He can no longer speak because of his disease, but he can type. Here a few of the questions he asked me:

1. Do you believe in God? What does the term “God” mean to you?
2. What do you think about the afterlife? If I don’t accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, will I go to hell?
3. How does one embrace God? (He would like to.)
4. How does one face their own death? (He said he had only months left.)

Those are a sampling of his questions. It was very challenging responding to them, but also very powerful and touching. I have thought about and even wrestled with similar questions at various times in my life. Often the wrestling was intense. This man was in the midst of his own wrestling match with God as he faces the end of his life. We are on sacred territory when we wrestle with God. The Bible honors such a spiritual activity. Some of the most important figures in the Bible do not meekly submit to God. Jacob is one of them.

When I read our passage for today about Jacob wrestling with that stranger in the middle of the night, I was reminded of this man with ALS. This passage in Genesis is an important passage for all the wrestlers among us. It comes in the middle of the Jacob story. That story is fascinating.

Jacob was a twin. He cheated his twin brother, Esau, when they were younger. Specifically he cheated him out of his birthright and the blessing their father Isaac wanted to give Esau, the first born of the twins. As you can imagine Esau did not take this well. He wanted to kill his brother. So Jacob fled.

He goes to a neighboring country where he falls in love with Rachel, his uncle’s daughter. Uncle Laban was a match for the conniving Jacob. He fools Jacob into marrying his other daughter, Leah, before he could marry Rachel. This required Jacob to work twice as many years than he had agreed to for the hand of Rachel.

Jacob ends up cheating Laban and fleeing. He decides to go back home, but that means confronting Esau whom he hasn’t seen in many years. Jacob is afraid. He sends a scout ahead and learns Esau is coming with 400 of his men. This does not look good. Jacob comes up with a plan to divide his travelling companions and possessions into two camps so at least half of them won’t be destroyed. He sends his family, animals and servants out before him as he stays behind alone on the other side of the Jabbok.

What follows is a very primitive story about Jacob being confronted by a stranger, a man, in the middle of the night. They wrestle until almost daybreak. The stranger asks to be let go before sunrise. Was he afraid, like vampires in our modern stories of being out in sunlight? Some commentators believe this was an ancient story about a river spirit wrestling with a man and the author of Genesis adapts it to his Jacob story and gives it a new meaning.

Whatever the origination of this story, it is perplexing, provocative, and ultimately instructive and hopeful. We are never told the identity of the man wrestling with Jacob. Some think it was an angel. Jacob apparently thinks it was God in human form. If it was God, it seems strange that Jacob could wrestle God to a draw. If it was God, it is peculiar that God would need to injure Jacob on the hip in order to get free.

If we can lay aside some of those peculiarities and questions, this story has much to teach us. Jacob believes he is wrestling with God. Jacob asks for a blessing from God and is given one. As one scholar points out, this is the first blessing Jacob has received in his life that did not come from cheating. He is given this blessing only after he gives his name, only after he reveals his true identity to God.

Remember in that day names were very symbolic. They captured the essence of the person. To know someone's name was to have power over that person. Jacob means "supplanter," one who grabs the heel of another to take advantage as Jacob did Esau in the womb trying to be the first born. Basically, Jacob reveals himself to God as a conniving cheater. And God blesses Jacob anyway, accepting him for whom he is. This blessing is pure grace.

Jacob also gets a new name: Israel. This new name means "one who strives or wrestles with God." Later in the Old Testament we see that a tribe of wandering nomads took on this name for themselves. They came to be called Israel. These are the chosen people and they lived out the meaning of this name in their history. They constantly wrestle with God. And we, who see ourselves as part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, still live into this name. Many of us wrestle with God. Many of us are still trying to figure out our relationship with God and how that relationship affects how we live and love.

Jacob's new name signifies he now has a new identity. This new beginning comes with a price. He limps into his new life. One does not come out unscathed after wrestling with God. We carry the wounds of that experience into our new lives. The wounding seems to be part of the healing.

Henri Nouwen, the great Catholic priest and psychologist, liked to talk about Christians as wounded healers. We all are wounded in some way by life, by circumstances, and by our wrestling with God. Those wounds should not prevent us from moving into the new lives God's grace makes possible. Those wounds should not prevent us from helping others in their own journey. It seems if we are to be a Christian we will do a bit of limping.

The initial result of all this wrestling with God and the blessing Jacob receives is the reconciliation he experiences with his brother Esau. You can read about that in the very next

chapter in Genesis, chapter 33. Verse ten in that chapter is particularly revealing. After Esau forgives Jacob, Jacob says to him, “for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

Because Jacob was willing to wrestle with God and eventually say he saw God face to face, he can now see God in others, even his greatest adversary. Isn't that what Jesus was getting at when he said when we do something to the least of these we did it to him? We are called to see the face of Christ in those we help. Being able to see the face of God within each individual is one of the fruits of wrestling with God, with taking our spiritual journey seriously, even if it is tough, even if it causes us to limp.

Herb O'Driscoll says that all of us who wrestle with God limp our way towards the sunrise. We limp into a new life, blessed, restored, healed, yet wounded. That is a very hopeful image. It can give us courage to wrestle with God. It can give us the integrity not to accept shallow answers to deep theological questions. It can give us courage not to abandon the wrestling and just live an unexamined life. It should help us not feel guilty because of all the questions we may have.

While we don't give new names to people who undergo a big change of direction or perspective, we can still celebrate seeing ourselves in a new way if we take our relationship with God seriously. We can hope for reconciliations where before we were estranged from others. We can see that our fears do not have to control our behavior. We may even begin to see the face of God in our enemies. Think how that would change how we treat our enemies! Amen