

October 20, 2019

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Take it to the Lord in Prayer

It is getting to the season for family gatherings... Thanksgiving and Christmas. For some of you, that is a good and wonderful thing. For others, it may be a sad thing because you recently lost a loved one, or it may cause your blood pressure to go up.

So, whenever I see a text in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament that deals with family, I am drawn to it. It reminds me of my own family of origin, and my own Family Of Origin Issues... or FOOI. We all have FOOI, don't we? And when we can glean some wisdom from the Bible that all families have problems, and that God can still accomplish God's good purpose through us humans, I am encouraged.

In our first reading today from Genesis, we encounter Jacob wrestling with an angel or God in human form all night long. Jacob holds on for dear life before daybreak, keeping God in the cradle move, and wins the match... but not without being marked forever. His hip socket was knocked out of joint and he had a limp. For his efforts, Jacob received a blessing from God and got a new name, "Israel." He who wrestles with God. Jacob's wrestling with God was preparing him for the rest of his life. Oftentimes out of struggle, we learn and grow and become stronger.

Why might Jacob wrestle with God? Well, if you recall, he was travelling back home to see his brother, Esau. Remember when they were younger, Jacob stole Esau's birthright, and later, tricked his father, Isaac, into blessing him instead of Esau. Esau then wanted to kill his brother Jacob and Jacob fled.

Seeing that the theme of lessons for today are about prayer, I am guessing Jacob's wrestling was symbolic of an intense prayer session with God... pulling an all-nighter at the ford of the Jabbock river. Can any of you relate to this idea of wrestling with God? Have you experienced any sleepless nights worrying about family, our world, or justice for the oppressed? Have you experienced a poverty in your own Spirit?

Several years later, after Jacob fled, he became quite successful. He married Laban's two daughters, Rachel and Leah, but was having problems with his father-in-law. One night, Jacob heard God tell him in a dream to go back home... back to the Promised Land where Esau lived.

This idea of going home put great fear in Jacob after what he had done to his brother. He may have been wealthy and successful, but he never felt complete. Being unreconciled to his brother caused great worry for Jacob.

So, he sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau to test the waters. The messengers returned with a message that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob felt a little stressed out, worried for his life. Therefore, he divided all his property, animals, and family into two camps. So if Esau overtook one, he would still have something left. During that time, Jacob bargained with God and prayed to God to deliver him from his brother, Esau. Then he tried greasing the wheels and sent a present to his brother... a large quantity of livestock.

That same night, just before they reached the Promised Land, Jacob sent his wives and family across the Jabbock river and he went back alone. There he wrestled with God... our text for today from Genesis 32. Beaten up and tired the next day, Jacob saw Esau coming toward him with 400 men. He panicked and divided his property again.

But much to our surprise, Esau ran up to meet Jacob, put his arms around him, and kissed him... and they wept together... one of the most beautiful stories of forgiveness in the Bible.

Sometimes in life, you have to make the first move... extend your bridge, or stay connected. How many of you are waiting around for someone to say sorry to you? How many of you are holding grudges that you don't even remember how they started? It takes more energy to hold a grudge than to forgive. And you can forgive someone without forgetting or submitting yourself to abuse by the other person again. Just hand them over to God and let God deal with them. I find that when I pray for someone, I am the one changed in the process.

Life is too short to hold grudges. You never know when your time will come to go home.

I knew a father from my last call who disowned his son for lying to him and to his siblings. I don't even know what it was about. He told me, "I didn't raise my son that way." I felt like he was being a little harsh... no one is perfect. And every Sunday when he came up for communion, he would look me in the eye... sometimes in tears. I knew he longed for that relationship to be healed. After years of encouraging him to reconcile with his son, he finally did. Unfortunately, the father suddenly and tragically died in a work related accident not too long after. We never know when our time will come, so take care of your unfinished business now. We have received so much grace from God and we are called to share it with others.

So yes, our lessons today are about being persistent in prayer. I encourage you not to give up when your prayers don't seem to get answered when and how you want them to. But I do know, when we pray, God hears us and sends help. Jacob's prayers didn't calm his fears right away until he felt his brother's warm embrace. Then he knew his prayers were answered.

May our God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast hear our prayers and help us in times of trouble. And may our broken relationships be healed. Amen