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Genesis 32:22—33:4
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Messy Life

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Common English Bible

Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."

Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." The sun rose as Jacob passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh. Therefore, Israelites don't eat the tendon attached to the thigh muscle to this day, because he grabbed Jacob's thigh muscle at the tendon.

Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two women servants. He put the servants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went in front of them and bowed to the ground seven times as he was approaching his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and they wept.

This is one of my favorite stories. I love it so much because Jacob has this encounter with this man/angel/God and Jacob is forever changed. Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and he tricked his dad, Isaac, into giving him his blessing. Jacob runs away and meets Rachel but ends up marrying Rachel's sister Leah and Rachel. The Bible is so exciting!

Twenty years pass. Jacob decides to return back home and he is very nervous about seeing his brother again. Jacob sends some messengers ahead of him to tell his brother that he is coming, and the messengers return saying that Esau has 400 men and they are on their way. Jacob is terrified and he divides all the people that are with him and all of the livestock into two camps thinking that if Esau and the 400 men destroy one camp then the other camp will escape. Jacob sends a present ahead to Esau, 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 30 donkeys. Jacob thought that he could appease his brother's anger with the presents that he sent ahead of him. But, will it work?

So, Jacob takes his 2 wives, his 2 maids, his 11 children and everything he has and sends them across the stream. Jacob is alone knowing that tomorrow he will see his brother again. This is the brother that he cheated, the brother that he stole from, the brother that hated him. That night Jacob wrestles with someone or something until daybreak. In the book of Hosea the writer says Jacob wrestled an angel. Jacob says that he saw God face to face, so it could have been God that he wrestled with that night. So, Jacob and this man or angel or God are wrestling and Jacob demands a blessing. And Jacob is renamed Israel which means one who struggles with God. The story ends with Esau running to meet Jacob, embracing him, falling on his neck and kissing him as they wept. They forgave each other!

I love this story because I love that Jacob wrestles with the man/God/angel. We like to go our own way, and pretend that we can do life all on our own, thank you very much. Then we reach a crossroads in our life and we don't know what is going to happen next. At those times we like to wrestle with God. After wrestling with the man/angel/God all night long, Jacob limped. Jacob was affected by that experience. I think of the things that have happened in my life to make me who I am. My parent's divorce when I was 2 or my stepdad's tragic death when I was 17, and through those experiences and so many more I have wrestled with God.

In Jacob's wrestling match, he faces both himself and God. It seems that this wrestling match ends in a draw. The man/angel/God asks to be released and Jacob wouldn't do it. Jacob demands a blessing, and the stranger doesn't automatically comply but instead asks, "Who are you really?" For the first time ever, Jacob was honest before the God who had created him. "I am Jacob, and yes, I've spent my entire life hungry for worth, so hungry I've grabbed at the worth of others or been jealous of the accomplishments of others or been so hurt in my own life."

It must have been a relief to Jacob to tell this man/angel/God who he was with a simple, straightforward answer. It was life-changing to be given a new name, to know that God saw through the manipulation and the hurt and the lack of worth and still valued Jacob enough to name him something new, something with favor. "You are now Israel, the one who has striven with God and prevailed." I don't think Jacob was suddenly and completely made whole at that moment. In fact, in the wrestling match his hip was dislocated by this God who wrestled him. Jacob was forever burdened with a limp after that, a limp to remind him that he was now forever accountable to this One with whom he had wrestled.

Jacob demands a blessing from God and he receives a new name as one who struggles with God. What is in a name anyway? Your name is your identity, it tells you who you are. When I was 12 years old my dad gave me one of those things that tells you the meaning of your name and it said "Kerry... Darkness." A few months later my mom gave me a name thing and it said "Lover of Light." I liked "Lover of Light" a lot more.

The name Jacob means one who takes the place of another. The name has taken on the connotation in this story of deceiver, trickster, manipulator. Jacob's new name of Israel is a reminder of his struggle and the positive outcome from that struggle. What we believe our name means, is probably a lot more important than what a sign maker says it is. Our name means that we are cherished, called by our God.

Jacob did some horrible things in his life. But he didn't give up on himself, he didn't give up on his family, he didn't give up on love, and he didn't give up on God. He was able to accept that he was lovable. And he claimed that love, he claimed God's love. When he wrestled with the man/God/angel, he knew that he was a beloved child of God and that he was worthy of God's love and blessing. Yes, he struggled. He struggled with his family, with his work, with God, but through that struggling he remembered that God loved him, from the very beginning.

One of the things that I have missed this summer is the Olympics. I love watching the Olympics. I remember four years ago in Rio de Janeiro at the Olympic opening ceremony they gave out this new award, the Olympic Laurel award. Kip Keino won a gold medal in 1968 and in 1972. He returned to Kenya and opened an orphanage. Kip said, "We came into this world with nothing and we will leave this world with nothing." So in the time that we are alive, he asked us all to support all the youth of this world to get the basics of humanity: food, shelter and education. He said education not only empowers our youth to be better citizens and leaders of the future, but it also helps them make a positive change and a mighty difference. We need to take better care of the planet and take better care of each other. I remember at that opening ceremony they showed 200 white kites, those kites were taken to Kenya and given to children who had never played with kites before. Those children wrote messages of peace on them, and sent them back to Brazil to be flown by children there. These orphan children will face struggles in their lives but through the love of Kip Keino they know that they are worthy. They know they are loved. When they come to a crossroads and face a struggle with man/angel/God, may they have the strength to persevere and may their lives be enriched by it.

The medieval mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila said, "As I see it, we shall never succeed in

knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God.” Crises have a way of helping us discover who God is and who we are. It is those times when I have felt like a disappointment or a failure, those tough times in my life, that reveal who God is and who I am. It was for Jacob. He was able to see all of the ways that God had blessed him his whole life long. He needed a crisis, a wrestling match with the man/God/angel to help him see this but he did. I wonder what it is in the wrestling of our own lives or in our world that God wants to dislocate?

In Jacob’s wrestling match, he finally received mercy, undeserved mercy, and knew what mercy was. It was the blessing he had searched for all of his life. May we see ourselves as God sees us because God made us and God sees us as good, as beloved. When we face a crisis, may we struggle through the process, trusting that we will see the blessings of God all around us. Amen.