

Wrestling With God

Genesis 32:28

Sunday, August 6, 2023

First Congregational Church of Wayne, Michigan

- *Prayer not answered right away*

This strange story is fundamentally about prayer, and what can happen when someone meets God in prayer. Preachers are supposed to be people of prayer, and one day a preacher's five year old daughter noticed that he father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. "Well, honey," he began, proud that his daughter was so observant of his messages. "I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." "How come He doesn't answer it?" she asked. Maybe he prayed some more after that, but one of the purposes of prayer is not just answers, but a striving to know God. In fact that is the most important purpose of prayer, and striving to know God will change you.

- *The story in the text*

We come this morning to the climactic event of the life of the great patriarch, Jacob; the night that God changed his name to Israel, and name that would be given later to the entire nation thereof. Jacob had been the fraternal twin of his brother, Esau. Esau had been born first, and as eldest was destined to receive the blessing of his father, a sacred honor in that culture, but Jacob stole the blessing with the aid of his mother. He disguised himself as his brother and his nearly blind father blessed him instead. (a family therapist would have a field day with the families of the Old Testament) This incurred, justifiably, Esau's wrath and Jacob had to flee for his life, never seeing his mother or father again. Years later, Jacob discovers that he and his family are on a course to meet Esau, now a prosperous man and Jacob is terrified that he will finally get his revenge. The night before the fateful meeting Jacob is on the shore of a ford alone when someone comes. They get into a wrestling match (the text does not explain how or why this match started) and it goes throughout the night. As morning approaches the other individual prepares to leave but Jacob will not let him go and begs him to bless him. The prophet Hosea (12:2-6) refers to this event and indicates two things: first, that Jacob by this time realized that he wasn't dealing with an ordinary human being but with the Lord; and second, that we, like Jacob, would do well to persevere when in prayer. Patience is required but many times people give up too early and miss blessings. Jesus echoed this theme (Luke 8) when He instructed His disciples not to give up when praying. God's timing is strange, but when He does act, He acts swiftly.

Now back to the story, the "angel" touches Jacob in the hip (he whacks him so hard that his hip dislocates) and tells him that his name will no longer be "Jacob" but "Israel". Israel asks the name of his co-wrestler and he asks him why he asks, implying that Israel knew deep down inside. Israel knows that he has encountered God and survived. He moves on to humbly ask forgiveness of his brother Esau, who does so and the two are reconciled, and apparently never meet again.

- *This God will change who you are*

The Bible makes much of names, and indicates that the name reveals the nature of the person. The name "Jacob" meant something like "supplanter" or "schemer" and revealed the unsavory selfishness of the person. "Israel" means something like "one who fights with God" and has the more positive tones of perseverance and an unwillingness to give up easily. The lesson for us is that we must persevere in prayer, almost like some athletic contest, and that we seek God not just for

blessings but we seek God for God. The Bible is replete with messages encouraging us to pray simply to know God better. It is at the core of why we exist. It may cost us something (getting whacked in the hip) and God will change us. The Bible says that when a person chooses to follow Jesus, they are given a new life. They are not the same person they once were, and the Holy Spirit continues to work on the person's character throughout the rest of his life. Did you know that there is a verse in the Bible (Revelation 2:17) that indicates that when you get to heaven, Jesus gives you a new name? Prayer changed Jacob and it changes us as well.

- *Conclusion*

This strange story provides a powerful image of true prayer, that prayer is rigorous and requires tenacity and perseverance. Prayer can cost us something, and that its purpose is, first and foremost, that we are to pursue and know God. The point is not to pray once, but to pray and keep praying and refuse to give up (like wrestling) until you've come to know God in a deeper way that you do know. That's the kind of wrestling the text calls us to do.