

Wrestling with Love

August 2, 2020

Today's message isn't for those of you who are perfect. If you've led a good and honorable life with no character flaws, no struggles between right and wrong, no questionable ethics, or selfishness, today's message isn't for you. If you can pray Psalm 17, which Jeff read for us with fullness of heart, if your lips have been free of deceit and violence (which really means you've never said an unkind word, never been quick to judgment, never tried to stack the deck in your own favor), if your feet have never strayed from a Godly path, go ahead and get up, make yourself another pot of coffee, maybe do a little dusting, and come back in about 15 minutes. Please do come back, we want to celebrate Communion with you, but these next reflections won't resonate with your lived experience.

Today's message isn't for the one whose character is unblemished. It's for those of us whose lives are a mixed bag — the person who tries to live a good life, wants to be good and honorable and righteous, and who also has engaged in manipulation, who sometimes slants the story to their own agenda, who twists the circumstances to their own benefit. Today's message is for those of us who have some of Jacob in us.

Do you remember who Jacob is? Allow me to remind you, in the broadest of brush strokes. Jacob is the son of Rebecca and Isaac, the younger twin of Esau. Scripture tells us that he came out of the womb holding on to Esau's heel. His name is sometimes translated as "heel," and other times as "userper" or "one who over-reaches." We know him best as the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, Joseph's father.

But before he got there, his life was marked by manipulating his blind father, deceiving his brother, and running away rather than facing the consequences of his actions. When he is far from home, he falls in love with Rachel, is deceived and manipulated by his future father-in-law, Laban, and then behaves in some shady ways toward Laban in return.

(Later this summer, we'll read the story of how his sons try to murder their brother, Joseph, which is a horrible story, but when you read it in the context of their father's legacy of lying, cheating, stealing, and manipulating, the fact that his children are dysfunctional shouldn't come as much of a shock.)

Today's passage, Genesis 32, tells us of Jacob's journey home after 20 years of being estranged. Remember, he fled 20 years ago after he deceived his father and manipulated his brother. And he didn't have a spotless record once he left home, either. But now, his in-laws have had it up to here with his "less than honorable ways," he decides that maybe it's time to go home, and as he's heading home, he learns that his brother is coming to meet him part way and has brought 400 men with him.

Today we pick up the story as Jacob has sent his family ahead of him across the river in two separate groups, ostensibly so that if his brother Esau catches some of the family, the

others will be safe. Now, while most of us also have a hard time identifying with Jacob's lying, cheating, and stealing, I don't suspect that many of you self-identified as being perfect and beyond reproach, without ever having said or done anything that is cruel or manipulative or untruthful. I think of the stories I've heard from two friends this week, of COVID exposures they've had. In both instances, the exposure happened when my friends were sitting with an acquaintance who refused to wear a mask, after quite some time the person mentioned that they were waiting on the results of a COVID test, and in the ensuing days the tests came back positive. In both instances, the person who knowingly exposed my friends is now spinning the encounter to fit a narrative that absolves themselves of blame and culpability.

While I pray that you are morally and ethically responsible enough to not knowingly expose another to coronavirus, this is just the most current example of how being deceitful and manipulative and engaging in unethical behavior is part of everyday people's lives. You don't have to trick your blind father and steal from your brother in order for Jacob's checkered past to have some resonance. Today's message is for those who justify their questionable behavior, those who fight dirty when backed into a corner, those who manipulate, because it has gotten you what you wanted or needed in the past, those whose goodness is sometimes obscured by the baggage of the faults, failings, and missteps of your past.

To those of us who fit that bill, this is a story of wrestling with Love before you get home. You see, in Genesis 32:22-31, we hear of a very different aspect of God than we talk about these days in progressive Christianity. Most of the time, we talk about God of kindness, mercy, compassion, gentleness, peace. We talk about God as a healer, reconciler. All too often, popular culture portrays God as a shield, a buffer, a magic talisman to keep us safe from harm, our enemies at bay.

But in today's passage, when Jacob wrestles with God all night, we are being shown that sometimes it is God who is at the center of our struggles. Sometimes, God comes not as a protector, but in the dark, as something that we perceive as a threat, and as with Jacob provokes us into wrestling throughout the night.

I think of my beloved father, and the radical transformation of his life. When I was growing up, he was a high power executive who did what was needed to get ahead, and who may have stepped on a colleague or two to climb the corporate ladder. His sisters and brothers remember him as having a fast temper.

And then, in the course of two years, his father died, he lost his job, my brother was born with Down Syndrome, and he was diagnosed with bone cancer. And as he strove to come out the other side of those four hugely significant life events, he had to wrestle with his priorities and values, staying at work for ungodly hours, putting the almighty dollar ahead of his employees, the anger that he had learned at home. He wrestled with the baggage that he had carried throughout life, the things that he thought he had to do to get ahead, to make something of himself, to make his father proud.

In the end, he traded the board room for winter camping with his special needs son's Boy Scout troop. He traded his anger for a listening ear. Like the limp that Jacob took with him after wrestling with God, Dad's face was permanently disfigured by his cancer surgery, but he, too, became Israel — one who struggles with God and with humans and is better for it.

Each of us has those aspects of our character that we're not particularly proud of; the baggage that we carry around, but also our greed, our selfishness, the things we do out of our egocentrism. All of these things separate us from one another and who it is that God has created us to be.

The story of Jacob, that scoundrel Jacob, wrestling all night with God and coming out different is a beacon, a map, that tells us that the things that separate us from Love do not have to have the last word. The struggles in life have the potential to soften us, to smooth our rough edges. The stranger who wrestles with Jacob never tells their name, but we know that it is Love, and when we wrestle with Love, we come out different, we are redeemed! Because that is what it means to be redeemed — it means to be brought home because of your inherent worth.

Now, wrestling, by its very nature, isn't easy. It's a struggle, whether we're wrestling with our greed, our selfishness, our pride, or if it's the fear and anxiety of our current experience here on earth that we're finding to be a struggle. Rachel Elizabeth Cargle is an African American author, academic, speaker, and activist known for her involvement in anti-racism work who I've been reading lately. Last week, she wrote:

There will be hundreds of those "hard days." The kind where you struggle to find the strength to even DEAL with what's in front of you. A major catastrophe at work, a horrendous family matter, a debilitating disappointment in yourself, a business breakdown.

Hundreds of those will happen throughout all of your glorious years.

So for the next one (the inevitable next one) bring out the flashlight and the tool box and the notebook and INVESTIGATE exactly what goes on in your heart, your head and your behavior during these times. Figure out what YOUR tools are to get through these: who you can call when these hit you, what place you can escape to in order to find peace and direction, what foods give you comfort or strength, what music gives you the pause you need, what authors or articles give you the kick in the pants that help you recalibrate.

Study yourself. That self awareness is a gentle way of loving on a future flustered version of yourself — your curating her first aid box before the pain comes her way again.

It will still be hard (unfortunately) but you will at least be able to manage it, use your tools to work through it and get back to the good stuff.

What Rachel Cargle names as investigating our heart, our head, and our behavior during difficult times is another word for using our wrestling for a blessing. When you're struggling — whether it's because of your own character flaws and behavior patterns, or the stressor is some external force — our lesson this week is to wrestle a blessing out of the experience. In doing so, we will encounter God, and we will be in great shape to go home with open arms, even if we now travel with a limp.

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Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15
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