

God of Blessings

Genesis 32:9-13, 22-30

We all struggle. Struggles in life are prevalent and different for every single person. Today's story of Jacob is a story of endurance and tenacity. As I've said before, I have defined tenacity as "the ability to keep doing something that is difficult". Today's story invites us to explore our feelings of being unworthy of God's love, or unworthy of the gifts that God has lavished us with. Today's story provides us with an example of the healing that can come when we engage in reconciliation with our whole beings.

I want to share some context of the story of Jacob to help us understand how we got to the part of the story that we did today, where Jacob is wrestling with this stranger. The story of Jacob is something that I think many of us can relate to. Jacob has been considered one of the bad boys of the Bible. He is known as a trickster, a thief, and a schemer. Someone who was not to be trusted. Jacob was also someone who had tenacity, as someone who kept on doing that which was difficult, even when he was afraid and especially when he felt alone.

Jacob and Esau were twin brothers. And they fought before they were even born. They were fighting in the womb, according to the story. Esau's name actually means "hairy", so he was considered to be this rugged person who was a great hunter. The name Jacob means "he grasps at the heel". So it was said that Jacob hung onto Esau's heel during the birthing process and was pulled out. So they named him Jacob. It can also be defined as someone who "pulls your leg" or is tricking you. So, grasping the heel. As I said, Jacob was a great trickster and he tricked his brother Esau into giving him his inheritance for a bowl of stew. For one day, Jacob found Esau very hungry and said, "I'll give you stew, but you've got to give me your inheritance." Which he did. Jacob not only tricked his brother, but he also lies to God and betrays his father in some of the other stories.

The story today – that's where we started – is about Jacob's transformation. He comes to a point in his life where he knows what he has

done is wrong and is hoping to reconcile with his brother and with God. Thus, we hear the story of him struggling with this person who is thought to be God in this story today. Jacob clearly feels guilty, for God has given him so much. In the verses that we skipped today, we hear how Jacob sent on ahead of him to Esau all the donkeys and cows and all these other animals. Jacob started his journey with a staff and ended up with herds of animals, lots of family, lots of people. He was lavished with so much. Jacob was, in that moment, trying to send his peace offering ahead because he was afraid that Esau would want to kill him because of what he had done. Then we hear the story that he goes off with his wife and his children. They are sent off ahead, and then Jacob enters this great wrestling match with God.

Wrestling is human. It can lead us to greater understanding and transformation. Some scholars have suggested that Jacob is wrestling with his shadow side and his past mistakes. Others think that perhaps it was his brother Esau that he was wrestling with – the one he had tricked and stole the birthright from. What we know about this struggle is that it was a great battle that takes enormous energy. As they grapple with each other, neither is able to overwhelm or prevail. In the end, Jacob tells the stranger that he is wrestling and will not let go until he receives a blessing. Did Jacob in that moment, as he was wrestling with this stranger, realize that it was God? Some scholars believe this to be true because of the length and the intensity of the struggle. In the end, Jacob gets marked for his life as his hip socket gets put out of joint. It is something that he will have with him to remind him of this moment for the rest of his life. Every time he walks, limps, he will remember God's blessing.

I think Jacob's story in his spiritual life has a few things to teach us. I believe that this story teaches us that God honours perseverance. God honours tenacity. In the end, Jacob was blessed by God. *And* Jacob ends up getting forgiven by his brother. The underlying truth as well in this story is that we are all worthy of God's love. Not one of us is unworthy of that. And, we like Jacob, can struggle with God and it is okay. Sometimes we need to struggle to fully understand who God is. Sometimes it's to understand what we have done wrong. Sometimes it is to help us understand when we have made decisions that might have hurt other people. Like Jacob, I think we are called to strive with God. To devote serious effort and energy into our work of reconciliation and forgiveness. And in the end, what we can discover is that Jacob couldn't find peace,

even in his abundance. Jacob only found peace once he had come to grips with his past. Once he had reached out to reconcile with Esau. That was when he found peace, only once he'd been blessed by God. In this struggle between Jacob and God, Jacob takes responsibilities for his past actions. By wrestling with God, he comes to grips with his own mortality. Will this experience help him now to face his brother and ask for forgiveness? Later in this story, Jacob looks up and sees Esau coming with four hundred men. He's obviously afraid, thinking his brother's coming to kill him. So what does Jacob do? He approaches his brother. He bows down, not once, but seven times. Jacob humbles himself before his brother. Without knowing what Esau might do, Jacob made himself vulnerable in that moment. This act symbolizes his remorse and his desire for reconciliation. What happens next is pretty amazing. Instead of harbouring resentment and striking his brother because of all that has happened, Esau instead runs to his brother, embraces him and together they weep. Esau extends hospitality, acceptance, and offers him forgiveness. They are both, in that moment, changed and transformed by their experience. So what will we discover about ourselves and our lives when we wrestle with God? How will we be blessed when we see God face-to-face? And how will we continue to strive for peace for all people in this world? During the darkness of the night, all alone, Jacob faced God with nothing but himself. And at daybreak, when God knew that Jacob would not let go, God blessed Jacob.

What is a blessing? A blessing can be defined as receiving God's favour and protection, approval and encouragement. When we are blessed, we are sealed in the love of God. Blessings come in many forms. Sometimes we bless symbols that help us to remain closer to God. We bless our homes and our families so they are safe and so that we are reminded of God's presence in our lives. We are blessed when we are baptized. We are blessed when we receive communion: the bread and the wine. We receive blessings of assurance after we confess our sins. We receive blessings on a new journey. And when we move into different stages of our lives, we ask for blessing. Many of us still ask for blessings before we eat. Blessings have the power to transform us, like Jacob. To initiate a fresh start, a new beginning, and to remind us that we are not alone. That we are part of a great community of faith. *And* blessings often come after a great struggle, or in times when we think something isn't possible.

This has been a hard week if we look around at what's been happening, and I think this story can remind us of things that we are called to do. I chose to participate in the counter-protest this week to the One Million March for Children. I felt called to stand with people who were seeking peace and harmony and not succumbing to hate. Some of you may have seen the signs on social media that there is no room for hate. I was personally shocked at the language and actions that were taken and said at this rally. I was disheartened that it would even happen in the first place. There was one moment, though, where I felt hope. There was one moment in that struggle where I could see that even though this was a difficult thing to do to stand in opposition to hatred, that standing there with others who chose love over hate can be very powerful. We were standing on the side by the Alberta Teachers' Association being shouted at by the other side. In that moment, people raised their hands in the sign of a heart and they kept silent. We did this while they continued to shout. There were some people from the other side who walked through trying to instigate something. But we stood in silence, we stood in solidarity, with love in our hearts.

The world needs more tenacity when we strive to bring peace and love in spite of hate. We're coming up on the day of Truth and Reconciliation, and again, I think we are called, as people of faith, to approach reconciliation with tenacity. To face our own privilege, to face the difficulties that come with this type of dialogue where we recognize how people have been hurt by others. When we recognize how we need to change our thinking and our ways of acting. I wonder how Jacob will inspire each of us to strive for peace, to live out our faith with tenacity in this world.

I invite you to take time with God. To share with God whatever it is that's in your heart right now. Share your struggles with God. Knowing that if we keep struggling, we will come to a point where we will be blessed. For God will bless us with peace and with love in this world. So go out in hope and go out in a spirit of tenacity.