

A Blessing and a Limp
Yr. A, Ord. Time 18
Genesis 32:22-31

Throughout our lives, at any given time, we will find ourselves struggling: wrestling with problems we can't quite seem to solve, grappling with situations that just won't seem to yield.

Such problems are sometimes very down to earth: practical concerns of finances or health, everyday difficulties in our family or work or social relationships. We might look back and wonder if we made the right decision; or, we may find ourselves looking forward with anxiety to the next decision. We may struggle with our vocation or our retirement; we may wrestle with how best to rear our children, or how to care for our aging parents.

Or again, sometimes these same problems with which we grapple seem to become deeply profound, and we find ourselves in what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul," asking ourselves questions about the meaning of life, plumbing the very depths of our faith.

For though these struggles may appear, on the surface, to be very ordinary human problems, we eventually come to realize that they have a spiritual dimension: As we struggle we find we have encountered God himself, and that encounter will almost surely leave its mark upon us, for better or for worse.

And that is what our scripture lesson from Genesis is about today: it is the story of a man wrestling with unsolved issues, coming to terms with his human history, and in the process, coming to terms with his relationship with God.

This is, of course, the story of the all-too-human Jacob, who by now has achieved much in his life—wealth, property, many children. And yet in the process Jacob has sometimes acted in less than admirable fashion, most notably his twice tricking and cheating his twin brother Esau, first out of his birthright as first born, and second, tricking their father Isaac into bestowing on Jacob the blessing which really was due to Esau.

And most likely it is some of that questionable behavior which is on Jacob's mind in this particular scene in which we meet him today, because after a twenty-year absence from his homeland, Jacob is now on his way back home. But as he journeys he learns that Esau has come out to meet him, and it doesn't sound like a welcoming party: he's brought a force of 400 men along.

At this point, understandably, Jacob becomes a little bit alarmed. He sends Esau a gift of some animals from his flock, hoping to soften his brother's attitude; he also sends his family and the rest of his party scurrying to safety, and makes plans to meet Esau the next day. But before the meeting can take place, another struggle occurs. The way the scripture puts it is interesting: "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until

daybreak.”

That’s all; just “a man.” No mention of where he came from or why they wrestled. And the struggle appears to be real: their grappling continues to daybreak, when “the man” realizes he cannot overcome Jacob, and wounds him by putting Jacob’s hip out of joint, causing him to limp from that time forward, as we later read. Then, as this mysterious man tries to escape, Jacob refuses to let go of him until he offers him a blessing (and yes, you can be forgiven if you’re thinking, “here we go again—Jacob’s angling for a blessing he doesn’t really deserve”).

At any rate, this “man” obliges him, and blesses him with a new name, Israel, which means, “you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” And with this, Jacob realizes the spiritual dimension of his struggle, and he in turn renames the location “Peniel,” “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

Now when I looked at this passage with the elders who were present at Session Tuesday night, some of them expressed some frustration at trying to understand how Jacob could prevail against God. How could God not win? But I think that what the Biblical writer want us to see in this story is this: in his long night of wrestling with this phantom-like creature, Jacob was coming to terms with his own story, with his own destiny, and his relationship with God. Before he faces his brother Esau, Jacob must face himself—he must deal with his own guilt for having tricked Esau, as well as to make a new life for himself and his family. In the process, he comes away with a new name, signifying a new identity. He also comes away with a limp.

How have your struggles in life and in faith changed you? What are the spiritual blessings you have received because you have entered into that struggle? Perhaps you have not acquired a new name, but how have you been transformed because of that struggle? Even though at the time you may have resented that struggle, did it make you stronger? Even though at the time you may have felt your struggle was only a human problem, is it possible you were really grappling with the spiritual presence of God?

And did your struggle perhaps leave you with a limp of some sort? A scar? A reminder of the wrestling you had to do? Did it change a relationship in which you are involved? Did it leave you with a memory that even now makes you a little somber?

Recently I read a book called *Amish Grace*, which tells the story of how the Amish community at Nickel Mines, PA, responded with forgiveness toward the man responsible for the shootings in their little schoolhouse in 2006. The blessings which they brought on themselves and the whole world as they reached out to the widow of the murderer, even as they were burying and grieving their own children, was truly a miracle. At the same time, there is no question that they will for a long time have to deal with the emotional scars they sustained that day.

Our own struggles of faith may never be so dramatic, but they will be no less real, no less profound. May our fellowship at the Lord’s Table today help to sanctify our struggles of faith, and help us to accept our limp.

