

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Genesis 32:22-31

SERMON SERIES: Lessons from the Life of Jacob

SERMON TITLE: Wrestling Before Reconciliation

This morning we conclude our sermon series entitled *Lessons from the Life of Jacob*. We left Jacob in Haran in his Uncle Laban's house, far away from his older twin brother, Esau, who had vowed to kill him because of Jacob's trickery and deceit at Esau's expense. But after more than twenty years with his uncle, God finally told Jacob to go back home—so Jacob left Haran. While on the journey, Jacob sent out messengers to Esau to express Jacob's desire for reconciliation. The messengers reported that Esau was coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men and Jacob was afraid. This brings us to this morning's scripture lesson from Genesis 32:22-31. It's the day before Jacob's meeting with his brother Esau. Listen for the word of God.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

As I noted a moment ago, the context for this morning's story from the life of Jacob, is Jacob's desire for reconciliation with his brother, Esau. The dictionary tells us that reconciliation is *a process of restoring a relationship gone awry, typically as the result of one party causing a rift*.

Now reconciliation is a risky proposition because it usually means that one party in the hostile relationship has to make a constructive move toward the adversary. And of course, the adversary may not be willing to reconcile—so risk is involved—and the deeper the hostility, the greater the risk. And sometimes, as Jacob discovered, reconciliation involves a wrestling match with God that changes us, wounds us, and makes us fully ready for a new relationship with the adversary.

All of this is captured in pastor Brett Younger's retelling of Jacob's story: On the day before their meeting, Jacob is wondering: "*Will Esau forgive me or kill me?*" *Jacob offers*

livestock as a gift or a bribe—whichever is more acceptable. Jacob sends sheep and donkeys, then children and wives on ahead. If he hears their screams the next day, he will rethink the idea of a family reunion.

He tells them that he will spend the night by himself on the bank of the river Jabbok. He doesn't tell them why he wants to be alone. He doesn't really know himself.

Then in the middle of the night, a stranger jumps out of the darkness onto Jacob...They wrestle shoulder to jaw, elbow to throat, knee to back..

The stranger wants Jacob's life. It's terrible for Jacob not knowing whom he is wrestling. Everything is shadows. Is it Esau slipping up on him early? Is it a night spirit, a ghost, prowling in the darkness?...Is Jacob wrestling with himself, struggling with his own demons? Is it an angel? Is it the God who has been haunting him all his life?

They struggle until just before morning when it looks for a moment as though Jacob will win. The stranger cries out for Jacob to let him go. Then suddenly everything is reversed when he knocks Jacob's hip out socket. Jacob is crippled, defeated, and helpless, but he clings for dear life, holding on like a drowning man: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Gasping for breath, the stranger asks, "What's your name?"

"It's Jacob."

"You are no longer Jacob. You are Israel—the one who wrestles with God."

Jacob has been reborn. Israel is the one who has faced God, been gripped by God, and struggled with God....

Jacob names the place Peniel, saying, "I have seen God face to face, and yet I lived to tell about it."¹

¹ Sermon by Pastor Brett Younger.

Jacob walks away from the struggle with a limp that will remain with him the rest of his days, but Jacob is finally ready for his encounter with Esau. So with the new day, as the two brothers move toward one another, Esau sees Jacob coming toward him, so he runs to meet him, he hugs him and kisses him and both brothers weep. Jacob says to his brother: *“to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”*

Sometimes the only way to reconciliation is through a wrestling match with God that changes us, wounds us, and makes us fully ready for a new relationship with the adversary. Even Jesus wrestled with God in the Garden of Gethsemane. In anguish, as he faced what we’ve come to interpret as his own reconciling work on the cross, he prayed to God that this cup might pass him by.

And it can happen to any of us with broken relationships. A man whom we’ll call Bob is a widower and a father whose second child was born out of wedlock. Bob’s relationship with the mother of his second-child was turbulent, to say the least. They had been engaged to marry several times, but after four years, the relationship was so bad that the woman wanted to end it and gain parental custody of their child.

At first, Bob blamed her for all of their difficulties. But Bob’s friends at church and his pastor confronted him with his responsibility for the deterioration in the relationship. They held him accountable. And this initiated Bob’s wrestling match with God that slowly and painfully changed him.

Through his struggle with God, Bob began to see that he had played the most destructive role in this relationship and this humbled him—it filled him with remorse and a profound sense of loss.

Well, not long ago, Bob wrote the mother of his child a letter. He confessed to her. He took responsibility for his actions. He asked her for forgiveness. She called him and they began to talk. Eventually they started seeing one another again. Now they are even discussing the possibility of marriage. Bob notes that *None of these positive changes...would have been possible if it were not for his wrestling match with God.*²

My brothers and sisters, sometimes the only way to reconciliation is through a wrestling match with God that changes us, wounds us, and makes us fully ready for a new relationship with the adversary. So I wonder: Where are the broken relationships in our own lives that may require a wrestling match with God on the way to reconciliation?

² Unknown. "Seeking Forgiveness." Power to Forgive. 24 Sept. 2001.
<http://www.forgiving.org/story/read_detail.asp?uniqueid=146>.