

A sermon preached by
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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
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TEXT: Genesis 32: 22-31

BRUTAL BLESSINGS

I was 49 – facing the big 5-0. And the church had granted me a three-month sabbatical. For several weeks I attended a Mid-Career Pastor’s Conference – held at a retreat center nestled amidst the beautiful Colorado Rockies. Part of each day we studied what is called the Enneagram – an ancient spiritual tool that helps us discover the unique way in which we see God, see the world, and see ourselves. But the Enneagram is not a feel-good way to affirm our strengths. It is instead a deep look into what Jung calls our shadow side.

The exercises and the reading we did during that conference forced us to identify the negative qualities of our soul and our personality – those places we run to when life is dark and the world is out to get us. The Enneagram forced us to accept who we are and who we are not. And then we were invited to figure out how to befriend this shadow side – how to take our wounded selves out of the shadows and into the light – to turn our weaknesses into a strength and a gift for the world.

Well, I hated what I discovered those three weeks. According to the

Enneagram template I am a type 1– the Judger, the Truth Teller, the angry perfectionist, the one who embraces strong standards of morality and behavior - and then expects others to behave the same way. Think Mahatma Ghandi. Or Hillary Clinton. Or John Calvin. Or Ann Coulter. Or most of the justices on the Supreme Court. They are all Type 1s – and when we get on our self-righteous high horses, we Type 1s can be pretty hard to take.

During those weeks in the mountains, as I faced my true self in this spiritual mirror, I shed some tears. Why couldn't I be Type 2 – the Lover who smothers people with love. Or Type 8 – the boss who effortlessly runs the world, never caring what the rest of the world thinks. Or Type 9 – the laid back schmoozer, who gets along with everybody while escaping responsibility?

Of course all these other Enneagram types have their own weaknesses – their own shadows – and our task whatever our type is, is to accept who we are, and then transform the shadow into light – using our unique gifts to transform the world into a better place. During those sabbatical weeks, I slowly wrestled with this hidden part of my soul and came to accept it and love it – and affirm the integrity and truth telling part of who I am. It is a brutal blessing – a strength I have been given as a leader in the church. Which puts me in good company with Jacob this morning.

It's hard to understand this morning's story outside the context of the entire saga of Jacob's life. You know the story. The son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, Jacob lives a melodramatic life – manipulated by his doting mother to steal his older brother Esau's birthright, exiled by his offended father, tricked by his uncle Laban to marry the wrong woman, finally settling down far from home, and getting rich, with lots of wives and property, and entirely too much stuff. Through it all, Jacob reacts passively to his life circumstances and runs away from the truth. And he has no apparent moral core - no purpose - no sense of himself as significant in the larger scheme of things.

And so, this morning, when we meet Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok River, he is alone, confused, scared, immobilized. And then, suddenly out of the dark void of his life, a stranger attacks.

Who is this stranger? Biblical scholars have analyzed this passage in a myriad of different ways. Perhaps the stranger is a river god, the spirit of evil and danger that haunts the raging river. Or some scholars believe that the stranger is Esau – confronting Jacob with a surprise attack to punish him for stealing Esau's blessing and birthright years before.

Other scholars suggest that the strange attacker is Jacob's own shadow side - the parts of himself that he has not owned, has not admitted.

According to this interpretation, this wrestling match is Jacob's coming of age, his confrontation with self-deception - Jacob's battle with the truth - so that the truth can finally set him free. After all, isn't the real victory in life the one we achieve within ourselves, when the best in us defeats the worst in us?

All of these interpretations about the strange attacker in the night are interesting. But let's step back and ask ourselves- what does Jacob think? The text clearly tells us that Jacob understands the violent stranger to be God. How can this be? How can we accept God, the Mugger - this muscular, sweaty, grunting savage who punches and strangles and wounds? What is going on here?

Well picture this. Those of you who are parents, can you remember those times when you tried to get eardrops in your toddler's ears or suction out his nose? Do you remember your child screaming "I hate, you!" My friends, maybe Jacob's God is like this parent, doing whatever it takes to be God-for-us, even if God has to wrestle us to the ground and hurt us so that we can be healed. (Teresa Lockhart Stricklen) – even if God has to wrestle within us to bring together the broken parts of our soul.

All of which leads to another question. If this grappling stranger is God, then how come the wrestling match takes so long? Why can't God just overpower Jacob, restrain him immediately – and end this painful battle?

And, why can't God win without wounding him? Because, my friends, wrestling is part of the healing process - because in that long night of contention with God - Jacob is able to look into the mirror of God's face and finally see the true image of himself. Jacob's long wrestling match changes him from a victim into a victor – giving him God's blessing - not a blessing stolen from another - but a blessing which can truly be his own.

And yet it is a mixed blessing at best. God blesses him by wounding him - reminding him and reminding us that rebirth, new identity, transformation is sometimes costly and brutal. The good news is that Jacob emerges from the darkness as a new creation - his own person - no longer his father's son, no longer his mother's fantasy, no longer a shell created by extenuating circumstances. He struggles and prevails and receives the blessing of a new name - Israel. Israel means "one who strives with God" - and it is the name given to all the people of God. For it is when we strive with God that we are forced to see ourselves honestly - who we have been and who we can still become.

Perhaps you have been moved by some of the stories that have emerged this week about John Lewis – an imperfect lover of Jesus who got into lots of good trouble. The New York Times found an old opinion piece that Lewis wrote in 1998. It was entitled "Forgiving George Wallace."

Wallace as you may remember was Governor of Alabama in the 1950's and 60's, when John was a poor sharecropper's son. Wallace was a segregationist who fought the civil rights movement with every fiber of his being. John Lewis writes:

Mr. Wallace used the language of rage and hate to rise to power and become a force in national politics. Staring down Federal officials, he told every black American that he or she was not welcome at the University of Alabama...Although he never pulled a trigger or threw a bomb, he created the climate of fear and intimidation in which those acts were deemed acceptable.

I met Governor Wallace in 1979 and I could tell that he was a changed man...he acknowledged his bigotry, and assumed responsibility for the harm he had caused. He wanted to be forgiven. I had to forgive him, because to do otherwise – to hate him – would only perpetuate the evil system we sought to destroy. George Wallace should be remembered for his capacity to change – for his effort to redeem his soul and in so doing to mend the fabric of American society. (NYT – 9/16/98)

It appears that at some point, George Wallace was assaulted by a Mugger God, wrestling in his soul – and at the end of it all he was both blessed and wounded – blessed with the realization that racism and segregation are evil and that all God's children are beloved and worthy in

God's eyes – blessed by forgiveness from one of the most wounded victims of his rage.. But Wallace's blessing also wounded him by forcing him to look into a spiritual mirror – to admit and repent of his hateful segregationist actions – a brutal blessing that left him with an ugly history that would forever be his legacy.

My friends, sometimes God confronts us in the dark shadows of our hearts. And sometimes God wounds us. But let us never forget that God is always for us - that the struggle is part of our salvation. And, that the blessing will be ours, when the night is over, and the new day is about to break. And then, with God's grace, we can become a blessing to others.

May it be so, for you and for me. Amen.