

The Rev. Randall R. Shirley
Transformational Prayer
Genesis 32:22-30
Matthew 16:24-26
November 7, 2021 (All-Saints Sunday)

Today marks the beginning of our third month into our Bible Journey. And it is my hope, that in our last weeks of preaching and teaching you have picked up on this vast difference. The difference in how the main characters within the Bible are portrayed... compared to those in most ancient literature. You see, in ancient literature, the main characters are heroes. They're often flawless. They're examples of how we should live, How we should strive to be like them. But the Bible is much different.

The Bible portrays its main characters as heavily flawed, often having a real lack of integrity, a lack of character. They're liars, cheaters, manipulators, and deceivers. So why is this? What's the reason for the difference? The answer is simple. The Bible was not written to be an example for how we should live. It was written for us to experience and encounter God, and its Grand Overarching Theme is that God meets with imperfect and complicated people like you and like me. Yes, ladies, even imperfect and complicated people like your husbands.

By experiencing and encountering God our lives are transformed. In John's Gospel we're told that the Word was written that you would believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in this Faith, you receive eternal life in His name. Encountering God changes us. For us, who have experienced this, there is no better life. Which is why I could never go to a church that preaches nor to a Sunday School that teaches, that only Perfect people may serve in God's Work. God uses broken people. He knows our imperfections and our shortcomings and the conflict we all face. The conflict that exists in all of us. The conflict between who we really are and who God calls us to be.

This account of Jacob is one-of-the-best-declarations of this conflict and of God's compassion for our brokenness. In God's Grace, He meets us right where we are. This is the story of our man Jacob. A story of a man's life full of complexity leading him to this wrestling match with God. But's let's put our reading in context with a little background. We know Jacob's name means grabber or deceiver. A name he lives into by selling a bowl of soup to his brother Esau for his birthright. A name Jacob lives into by dressing up like Esau to deceive their father, who is now feeble and blind. Jacob has taken his brother's birthright and blessing, and in fear of death at the hands of Esau.

Jacob runs away to his uncle's home. There, Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel and works for her hand in marriage. But Jacob, the deceiver is deceived. Laban tricks Jacob by giving him his older daughter Leah on the wedding night, and Jacob doesn't even realize the switch until the next morning.

I must admit, I still haven't figured that one out.

Jacob agrees to work another seven years for Rachel, and after some time, with two wives, and two concubines, Jacob has acquired tremendous possessions. Jacob is told by God to return home, to the land of his fathers. It's on this returning-home journey that we now press into our passage. Finding Jacob Wrestling with God. Please open your Bibles with me to Genesis, Chapter 32.

At the beginning of this chapter, we're told that Jacob is in great fear. He doesn't know where he stands with his brother. He doesn't know if Esau is still intent on killing him. In verse 6, Jacob is told that his brother and 400 of his brother's men are heading to meet him. NOW Jacob is really afraid. In anticipation of the worst, he divides his camp. Dividing his family into two groups. Thinking, if Esau attacks one, surely the other will get away.

It's his immediate action. Acting first, then praying to God. Sadly, isn't that what most, if not all of us do. We're quick to move and then come to prayer. Coming to prayer only as our last resort. For so many that's just the way we do it. We treat prayer as our fallback option. We act, we make decisions, and often our prayers; if we pray, are prayers informing God of what we have put in place. It's that conflict within us. It's part of the WHO we really are. It's part of the difficulty of Living in a Me First world.

The Apostle Paul fully understood this when he wrote in Romans 7, I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. The desires of our flesh in competition with God's desire for our lives. It's this conflict within Jacob that he now brings before God. Look with me in verse 24. Jacob has sent everyone off, and in verse 24, we read that Jacob was left alone, and a man (God) wrestled with him.

Jacob was left alone. When you're left alone - when you're unplugged from the world, when you stop listening to the gossiping advice of others, that's when God does the best work in your life. When you're alone with God is when you open your heart and mind for Him to put Light into those deepest and darkest places. When you're alone with God is when you wrestle with Him. For Jacob, this wrestling goes on all night, and in verse 25, we read that God saw that he could not prevail.

God could not overpower Jacob. THIS has NOTHING to do with Jacob being more powerful than God. There's a battle going on within Jacob. The battle between God's purpose for Jacob and Jacob's fleshly desires. It's that conflict between what we want for ourselves and what God wants for us. It's our will against His. Do you not hear those precious words of Jesus who said, "What good is it to gain the whole world, yet forfeit you soul?" You see, Jacob's been pushing and manipulating and getting away with his own agenda. He hasn't completely dialed into the whole thought of God's love. Jacob's been tied to the flesh, the old man. AND THEN! Here in our reading, Jacob does this one thing.

The thing we all need to do. Jacob clings onto God. When you cling onto God, God has an incredible way of working within our lives. In ways that we least expect it.

What appears to be a wrestling match with no winner is really God's continuing work with Jacob. The pre-incarnate Jesus just touches Jacob in a very pointed way wrenching his hip letting Jacob know that God is in control. It's Jacob's turning point, Jacob's getting a sense OF-WHO HE IS WITH. In verse 26, God tells Jacob to let him go and Jacob says, "I won't let you go unless you blessed me." Listen to that. Jacob, tells God, that he will not let Him go.

Did you ever think, "How did Jacob get hold of God that God would say, let go of me?" How do we hold on to God in that special way that He can't get away? How do we do that? The answer is Prayer. It's part of the Power of Prayer. My friends, if you want an audience with God, if you want to address the conflict within you, then FIRST, GET ALONE GOD.

Get away from the distractions of the world. We know that Jesus prayed in quiet places of solitude. Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. Jesus says when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, for they love to be seen. Go to your rooms, close the door and pray to your Father. and SECONDLY Pray in truth.

Cling onto God in truth. In verse 27, God asks Jacob: What's your name? You see, God never asks a question because he needs an answer. God only asks a question so that WE'LL reflect on the question, and for us to reflect on OUR response to that question. What's your name? What God's asking Jacob, is: What are you? What's your character? What are you made of? What's in your heart? Who are you really? Jacob answers honestly, it's what's inside Jacob: Deceiver, and Liar. That's Jacob, the deceiver and liar. It's important that Jacob is brought to this place, and it's so important for us to be brought to this place. To answer this question, "WHO ARE YOU?" To face the conflict within us.

BEFORE God can REALLY take root in our lives, we must face who we really are. Listen, you can fool your neighbors, you can fool your friends, you can even fool your family; but you CANNOT fool God. Jesus says, true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth. God anoints and blesses those who are real – as imperfect as you are - be who you are before God.

THIRDLY, when you are alone with God in truth about yourself, be prepared for transformation. In this passage, is where we find this prayer being the beginning of Jacob's transformation. God says, Yes, Jacob that is who you are now. Jacob is your name in your flesh., but I'm giving you a new name. A new beginning. For NOW ON, your name is Israel. Jacob is given a new Identity.

When your alone with God, ready to admit who and what you are, you open yourself to God's transformational power. It happens to all the saints. On this All-Saints' Sunday

when we honor all saints of the church, our friends and family, all who have died in Christ and are now with Him in Heaven, I want to draw your attention to one of my favorite Saints, Gladys Aylward. Before her death in 1970 she was asked about her faith and how her journey in Christ began.

Gladys said she had to come to grips with who she was. She said, like Jacob, she had to stop fighting, wrestling with God. To stop putting her will over His. Her journey is captured in the Hollywood movie, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. In the movie, Gladys is portrayed by Ingrid Bergman, who became famous in the film *Casablanca*. According to Ingrid, playing the part of Gladys is what led her to Christ. See, Ingrid's personal life was in chaos. She had just left her husband and children to marry an Italian movie producer. The more Ingrid learned about Gladys, the more she looked inside her own life. Ingrid says that it was in the silent waiting between scenes, *Alone with God*, that she admitted who and what she was. In her desperate need of a Savior, she encountered and accepted Jesus.

Years later, and in just-a-few months before she died of cancer, Ingrid took part in the Easter sunrise service in Palm Springs, California. She read from the Bible, the account of The Resurrection. Although her movie career had won her many accolades, Ingrid's greatest reward was receiving eternal life through Jesus Christ. *Alone with God*, the truth had set her free.

Let us pray, Father strengthen us to be alone with you. That in those quiet places we would cling onto You, acknowledging who we are and our need of Your healing. That we would be brought to that place where You ask, "what's your name?" To be brought to that place where we are open to Your transformational power. A place where truth set us free. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.