

Jacob at the Jabbock
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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About two weeks ago,
I bought an alarm clock.
I don't have one, you see,
I just use my phone as my alarm.
Which works fine.
I didn't want the alarm feature.
I wanted the clock -
so that I didn't have to turn my phone on to see what
time it was
when I woke up in the middle of the night.
You know the feeling -
you wake up and wonder, should I just get up,
or should I try to fall back asleep.
And I read that that electronic light isn't good,
so I got a little \$6 clock with a soft blue light.

And then, one morning a few days ago,
I woke up before my alarm,
looked over -
and no blue light.
No clock.

And I thought, why do I buy cheap things?
I almost always regret it.

You know?
I mean, not always,
but if you want something to work more than two weeks
that dictum:
you get what you pay for
is more often true than not.

Of course we don't always have a choice: cheap is what we can afford.

But we wish we could afford better, don't we?
And we wish that because we know:
if you want it to work for more than two weeks,
maybe \$6 is a little on the light side.

Now, I could use the anecdote to talk about lots of things:
about our cheap consumer culture,
about how we need to cultivate more Sabbath and rest in our lives and stop setting alarms,
about economic justice and how people need a living wage,
but those are for another day.

I want to talk instead about this idea: you get what you pay for.
Or rather, that what is purchased on the cheap does not last. Is not strong enough.

I want to talk about the insufficiency of cheap grace,
about how if you want a life of meaning and purpose,
if you want to count for something,
if you want a blessing,
then you've got to work for it.
You've got to wrestle though the night with your own angels and demons,
with the holy and the trembling mystery.
If you want the blessing, you have to struggle.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

Jacob at the Jabbok is a short story in the book of Genesis,
as many of the stories are.
Just a few lines.
But it has the essential elements of the transformational religious story.
Jacob sends his family across the river,
and he waits alone at night.

That's when we do some of our best wrestling, isn't it?
At night, alone, we wrestle, we struggle,
we try to understand, to grasp and to hold,
the meaning of our lives and the meaning of our pain.
Why, lord, why?
What shall I do with this life?

Jacob is there, as the sun goes down and the stars come out,
and someone comes to wrestle with him.
We can understand this as the ancients would have themselves,
as a metaphor,
but perhaps your struggle, your wrestle,
is with a real person:
perhaps you are grappling with a parent, a child,
a lover or an ex-lover,
a co-worker or a neighbor or sibling -
someone whose issues, whose needs, whose desire for or against you,
requires you to reach and work and puts you out of joint.
It might be a metaphor, and it might be real.

Someone comes to wrestle.
They struggle through the night.
The struggle is real.
The pain in the joint is real, the challenge is real.

The child, without words and without friends, feels real
pain.
Her blanket of words from home is not sufficient to keep
her warm
in the new cold land.
I've been rebuked, I've been scorned.
This is real.
The pain, the loss is real.
Our choir did a lovely job with that old spiritual -
thank you.
And I want you to hear the echoes,
it's a spiritual.
Sung by enslaved Africans -
I've been scorned, I've been beaten, I've been killed -
Dr. King asked Mahalia Jackson to sing that for him -
I've been rebuked,
called a traitor, a criminal, a thug, and worse,
there is trouble all over this world

but I'm not going to lay my religion down.
I'm not going to lay my religion down.

There have been losses on the way
a parent
a partner

I have enough today,
be near and help be mend.

The struggle is real.
But I shall not give in.
Jacob wrestles the angle,
and he will not let go -
he will not let go -
until he receives the blessing.

And there he blessed him. **30** So Jacob called the place Penile, [d] saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

He will not let go of the struggle until he receives the blessing.

This is what I want to talk about -
we all struggle sometimes.
Some much more than others.
We struggle with pain, with grief, with injury to soul and
body,
we struggle against and with racism and classism and
sexism,
ageism and ableism,
we struggle to get through the day and the week,
we struggle in our intimate relationships and our
encounters with strangers.
The struggle is real.
The wrestling is real.

But do not let go, do not let go,
do not move on,
until you have demanded a blessing.
Until you have received your blessing.

Now, that raises the question, of course, what's a
blessing?
When "blessing" came out as the theme for this month,
I thought, well, that'll be interesting. That's a word we
have to explain.

This is an old joke because if it was ever true it isn't true
now.
We know what a blessing is.

It is what makes our grateful spirit sing.
It is the gift of life, given freely.
It is the gift of mind, transcending borders.
It is self-discovery, it is community that holds us when
our fires burn low,
it is wonder at all that is,
it is words of love and deeds of worth.

It is not cheap, at least it should not be.
Sometimes you hear people say, #blessed, or blessing,
in a way that makes you think they mean the absence of
sorrow.
But the truth is deeper:
only when we know pain do we know grace.
only through struggle to we come to blessing.

What is the blessing in this story?
It is, of course, the new name.
Israel, one who strives.
Jacob is renamed.

Blessings work that way, sometimes:
we take on a new name, a new identity.
We've been through the fire, and well and truly cooked:
we ain't the same.
We have a new identity:
we are a parent, where before we were not.
we are a graduate.
we are a widow.
we are a survivor.
we are a veteran.
we are sober.
we are now ourselves.

We have gained a new blanket of words,
and now can be us, wherever we go.

We have lived in the heart of sorrow,
so we can open our heart to kindness.

I think you know a blessing by its marks,
by what happens and how we respond.
The story gives us the clues we need to know:
three marks of the blessing.

First, the name change.

From Jacob to Israel.

The change of name marks a blessing, a change, a new
beginning.

I've changed my name, intentionally, four times:

From Matthew to Matt when I started Jr. High -

I wanted to fit in,

and from Matt to Matthew when I started seminary -

I wanted to be myself.

I changed it when I got married and I changed it back
when I got divorced.

There are many famous name changes:

designed to say, this is the new me.

From Malcolm Little to Malcolm X to Malik el-Shabazz.

From Saul to Paul.

From Miriam Simos to Star hawk.

Most of the folks I know who've made a name change,
as a sign of their new identity,
are trans* folks.

In fact, by coincidence, my friend and college Sean
Dennison, who serves our church in McHenry,
posted this morning that today, 16 years ago,
was the day he chose his new name, and became Sean.
And someone replied - happy Seanday!

Whether they've transitions from the gender they were
assigned at birth
into their true gender identity,

or moved into a gender non-conforming identity,
these trans* folks often take on a new name, one freely
chosen,
as a sign to others, but also as a sign to themselves:
this is the real me, the honest me.
In this context of hatred and transphobia, of bathroom
bills and hate-speech,
I am so glad to serve a church that says
we want the real you, your honest and true self,
your blessed name and your blessed nature,
and you are welcome here to be your real self, whatever
gender or beyond gender you are.
And I want us to live in and build the society where
being your real true self is seen everywhere as a blessing
and never a cause for persecution.

What about you? Is it time for a new name?
To mark a blessing, hard-won, in your life?
To reclaim and name or to choose a new one?
Second, an injury. A wound or a scar.
In the story, Jacob's hip gets put out.
And I know quite a few of you have had your hips, knees,
shoulders, or elbows replaced -
so maybe you sympathize.
Wendell Berry writes of a sycamore tree which
"bears the gnarls of its history healed over."
Whether the struggle that leads to our blessing produces
a physical scar or an emotional one,
it will leave a mark.
It will cause injury, and we will have to learn to live with
that.
Stretch marks,
surgery scars,
worry lines,
grey hair.

Emotional triggers and responses - we might begrudge them,
but they are keeping us safe, or they can be keeping us safe,
from further injury.

Do you have an injury from your blessed struggle?
A physical or emotional scar?

A scar, recall, is evidence of healing -
of the power of the body and soul to heal over what is torn,
without erasing what happened, but reconnecting yourself.

Give thanks for this wound - I know that's hard -
but without admitting that it hurts, we cannot really experience the blessing.

Put your thumb over the wound, and bless it.

Earlier this week, Krista Tippit, the radio host, interviewed Brene Brown, the author, about vulnerability and struggle.

It is as if they conspired to create the perfect words for this sermon.

Brene Brown says "hope is a function of struggle."

Krista Tippit notes how different that hope is from the starry-eyed fiction that everything is always wonderful.

And Brene Brown says:

The most beautiful things I look back on in my life are coming out from underneath things I didn't know I could get out from underneath. The moments I look back in my life and think, "God, those are the moments that made me," were moments of struggle.

And Tippit says, as a benediction, a last word:
Hope is brokenhearted on the way to becoming wholehearted. Hope is a function of struggle.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
Though you've broken your vows a thousand times,
this is no caravan of despair.
Self-pity must not have its way,
now the healing starts.
Hope is brokenhearted on the way to becoming
wholehearted.
When it matters, cheap grace will not do,
it is struggle - loss and trouble, wrestling through the
night with your angels and your demons,
that gives the blessing,
and that will leave a mark.

Finally, you know a blessing when you mark the place.
He called the place Penile,
I have seen the face of God, and yet was not destroyed.
Do you mark the place where you struggle and were
blessed?
The road where the accident happened?
The kitchen table where the fight happened?
The quilt you got when the cancer came?
The gravestone where the lover's body lies in peace?
The bar where you had your last drink?
The church where you got married?

Mark the place, remember it, name it -
you were blessed there.
You struggled, you did not let go, you bear the scar, you
claimed your new identity,
so mark the place.
It has been years since I have been to the place -
a campground overlooking Hood Canal and the Olympic
Mountains,
in Washington State -

where I got my call to ministry,
but it is holy ground.
Penile, I have seen the face of the holy, and was not
destroyed.
At least not yet, anyway.

Name the place, a place where grace came to you,
where you rose from the hard night,
where you faced the rising sun,
and walked, even if with a limp,
and walked, across the river,
to rejoin your family,
waiting there as they were,
waiting for you to come,
a new person, blessed in ways they cannot imagine,
waiting for you to rejoin the company of travelers,
a survivor, a struggler, one who is blessed.
You paid the price, you earned it,
and it is yet freely given -
a blessing, a wonder, and an invitation:
now that you have known sorrow,
you know kindness -
and so, with your blessing, what?
what shall you do?
what grace, what blessing, shall you now offer the world?
I leave you with that question to ponder,
till we gather again a week from now.
Let us now, a people of struggle and blessing,
rise in body and spirit
to sing together.