



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 14, 2013

"What Is Your Name?" - Genesis 32:22-32

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

This morning we're continuing our sermon series on "The Questions God Asks Us". This summer we're looking at 12 questions God asks people in the Bible. Today we'll explore a really strange question that God asks a guy by the name of Jacob. God already knows the answer to this question, but He asks it any way. After an all-night wrestling match God asks Jacob, "What is Your Name?"

Based on a true story, the film "October Sky" is the story of a blessing finally given by a father to a son in the eleventh hour and 59th minute. "October Sky" is set in a poor West Virginia mining town in the late 1950's. The United States is in an uproar about the achievements of the Soviet Union in space. Four very different senior high school students in the town begin to have a new dream for their lives. The power of that shared vision brings these four very different young men together.

But there is an enormous challenge facing these four young men. For generations the men in this humble mining community have been expected to grow up and join their fathers and grandfathers in the dirty and dangerous work of the coal mine. That's the best future they should imagine.

But with the encouragement of one of their high school

teachers, these four young men dare to dream a different dream for their lives. They begin to dream about going to college. The story focuses on the group's leader, Homer Hickham, and the specific challenge he has with his dad for his dream. As the story unfolds, it becomes abundantly clear to everyone that Homer's father wants his son to follow in *his* footsteps and that means a career in the mine. It's almost as if his dad is seeking a blessing of *his* life and career from his son... when what his son needs is a blessing from his father.

Without his dad's support, Homer and his friends begin testing various rockets. Homer's dad thinks it all a big waste of time. Finally, with the encouragement of their teacher, these four high school students enter a national science competition and win full college scholarships. Their teacher took the time to look into the lives of these young men to see something there that Homer's dad didn't see, or wasn't willing to see. She looked into their lives and saw their unique capabilities and passions. And that made all the difference to these young men and their future. She blessed them.

I'm going to ruin the end of the movie for you. But it's been out for 14 years so I don't feel bad about telling you how

the movie ends.

In the last scene of "October Sky" these four young men surrounded, by townspeople, friends and family, prepare to fire their last and largest rocket. They've painted the name of their teacher on the side of the rocket. Many from the town are there to cheer them on with one notable exception, Homer's dad. Once again, he has not gone out to support his son.

As Homer stands in front of the crowd, he thanks every person who has blessed them with their support and encouragement. He then dedicates this last rocket to his mother *AND* to his father. As he makes that dedication, to the surprise of everyone, his dad, for the very first time, steps through the crowd and the eyes of a son meet the eyes of a father and a blessing long withheld is finally given. Here's that closing scene from "October Sky".

Without saying one single word, but with one simple act, a dad finally blesses his son. He puts his hand on his son's shoulder and with a look of wonder in the dad's eyes, a father finally blesses his son. It's as if he is seeing his son for the first time. He finally sees what others see in his boy and he gives a blessing that only a father can give a son.

Every single one of us knows what it feels like to want that blessing. And many of us know how painful it is when a father or a mother, for whatever reason, is unable to give it.

All of us enter adult life with a blessing deficit. Even if we had the best parents on the planet, all of us have a blessing deficit. What we do with that need for a blessing influences the decisions we make in life because all of us go on a blessing hunt. One of my professors at Fuller Seminary, a sociologist by the name of Jack Balswick, said that a group of young men in an inner city gang is a collection of young men in search of a blessing. They're in search of a place where they will be affirmed as men. Others of us go in search of a blessing in lots of other ways.

The story of Jacob and his fraternal brother Esau is a story about that hunger for a blessing. The scene we're going to look at from Jacob's life is about the giving of a blessing, a blessing that can be given to us by one person.

In the text that was read for us we see Jacob in the fight of his life...and that's saying a lot if you know his story. Jacob has an unsettling encounter with God that ends up with God giving Jacob a blessing that begins to transform his life. It's this blessing from God that can help moderate our voracious need for a blessing from others.

When we think about having a deeply life-transforming encounter with God, most of us do not picture what happens in this story. We think about experiencing God as we pray, we think about being at peace, maybe sitting quietly, getting centered. I often have amazing times of prayer

outdoors sitting beside an alpine lake, or by a beautiful stream or at the ocean. Sometimes the presence of God is so real to me in places like that, that I do not want to leave.

The main character in this story is a guy by the name of Jacob. He's on his way home for the first time in 20 years. Jacob has a brother whose name is Esau. They're fraternal twins. The last time they saw each other, Esau wanted to kill Jacob, which is why Jacob ran away from home. Jacob had cheated his brother not once, but twice. And now Jacob is on his way home for the first time and Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men.

In the middle of the night, Jacob has a very intimate, up close encounter with God. But that encounter is not like what I've experienced beneath the Grand Tetons on a beautiful summer day. It is the night before Jacob is supposed to meet his brother for the first time in two decades. He's alone, filled with fear, wondering what's going to happen in the morning when he meets his brother. And right in the middle of all that, God jumps Jacob and wrestles him to the ground.

I love this about our God. All of a sudden, right here in the middle of the book of Genesis, were in the WWE Night of Champions. But unlike the wrestling you see in the WWE, this wrestling match is for real. God wrestles with Jacob and they struggle with each other for hours! Have you ever been in a wrestling match? If you have, you'll know that wrestling for three minutes can be exhausting!

Jacob doesn't get centered in this encounter with God. God

knocks him off balance, which is an experience you and I sometimes need. In the middle of this wrestling match Jacob gets super clear about some very important things in his life. This is not the kind of life-changing encounter most of us expect to have with God. But this wrestling match turns out to be THE turning point in Jacob's life. By the time we get to the end of this story Jacob is a different person...not a perfect person. By the end of this story Jacob is not free of all his character weaknesses, but something very important has changed in his life. It's all gotten very personal for Jacob along side the Jabbok River.

One of the things we're going to learn in this story is that it has to get personal for you and me as well. Our faith in Jesus Christ has to become something so much more than a set of propositions to consider and maybe argue about. It has to get personal. Has it gotten personal for you? Has God started bothering your life? If God is upsetting your life, it's beginning to get personal.

When we're talking about the God of the Bible we're talking about drawing near to a God who can be wild. Drawing near to God takes guts. Jacob discovers, in the middle of the night when he's all alone, that God is a wrestler. You know your faith has become truly personal when you realize that God is upsetting your life. When you start to consider the possibility that there just might be some things in your life that need change, when you start to see that maybe there are some really significant things you need to start doing, and maybe there are some things you need to stop doing, you're in a wrestling match with God.

And that can be a really good, but exhausting experience.

Here's what's behind all this wrestling. God wants to speak a word of blessing into our lives and sometimes we're only going to be able to hear and receive that word of blessing when we're in a place of weakness.

Let's look again at the text. Genesis 32, verse 22.

Gen. 32:22 The same night (Jacob) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. (And he had a ton of stuff by that point in his life.)

From the moment we meet him in the Bible, Jacob is a schemer. He always has a plan. He's always trying to trip up his adversaries. He comes out of his mother's womb with his hand wrapped around his brother Esau's ankle.

You can see an example of his scheming here in this scene. He knew that in the morning he was going to face his brother and an army of men. So what does he do? He divides up his livestock and his family into different groups. During that last 20 years he's become enormously successful. He is a wealthy man and is the father of a large family. What he plans to do is try and bribe his brother. He will send wave after wave of animals and family members out in front of him. He will offer the animals to his brother as a gift in hopes that it will calm Esau down.

Verse 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

What is that about? Jacob literally means "he grasps the heel." During his mother's pregnancy these two boys wrestled with each other so much that she prayed to God and asked what was going on inside her. God said, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, (and listen to this, this is very important) the elder (that's Esau) shall serve the younger (that's Jacob)." That was God's plan and it went completely against the cultural expectations of the day. In that culture, the youngest child served the oldest.

Twin boys are born to Isaac and Rebecca. Esau comes out first with Jacob holding onto his foot. Esau is the older of the two but God says, "I've chosen Jacob." That is just like our God, who loves to turn our cultural expectations upside down. God chooses the weak. He chooses the nobody. Isaac, the dad, didn't like God's choice. Esau was his favorite son. Jacob was her mother's son.

Isaac loved Esau more than he loved Jacob and I think that was extremely painful for Jacob. Isaac wanted Esau to be his chosen heir. God said, "Jacob is my choice to be the one through whom the Messiah would come". Isaac said, "He's not mine. Esau is my choice."

So, when Isaac was very old he wanted to put his affairs in order. He intended to bless his older son, Esau. But with his mother's help Jacob pretends to be Esau and tricks his blind father into giving his brother's blessing to Jacob. Isaac unknowingly blesses Jacob. I think Jacob wanted to hear his father say how much he loved him even if it

meant pretending to be someone else to get it. I think a lot of us know quite a bit about pretending to be someone we're not in order to secure the affirmation and respect of others.

Every single one of us needs to hear a blessing from significant people in our lives. Every child needs to experience a blessing from both their father and their mother. Those are different kinds of blessings and both are needed. We all need to be blessed and it's not something we can give to ourselves. It has to come from the outside of us, from someone else. We all grow up with a blessing deficit and sometimes we end up seeking a blessing in relationships or through personal achievements that only leave us more profoundly wounded. That was Jacob's story.

Here in Genesis 32, Jacob has decided to go home. He thinks there's only one thing that's keeping him from having the life he's always wanted. He must face the one person who has always been the main problem in his life, his brother Esau. He's going to have it out with Esau. He's going to get his life on track. But on this night, alongside the Jabbok River, something completely unexpected happens.

With the sound of the stream in the background and under a sky filled with stars, Jacob suddenly realizes that there is someone behind him. He isn't alone.

Nobody does a better job than Frederick Buechner in capturing what this wrestling match was really like. Listen to how he imagines Jacob's fight for his life in his book *The Son of Laughter*.

“**F**or the rest of the night we battled in the reeds with the Jabbok roaring down through the gorge above us. Each time I thought I was lost, I escaped somehow...There were moments when I seemed to be prevailing. It was as if he was letting me prevail. Then he was at me with new fury. But he did not prevail. For hours it went on that way...We could not see each other. We spoke no words. I did not know why we were fighting. It was like fighting in a dream. He outweighed me, he out-wrestled me, but he did not overpower me. He did not overpower me until the moment came to overpower me. When the moment came, I knew that he could have made it come whenever he wanted. I knew that all through the night he had been waiting for that moment.”

I have a number of happy memories of wrestling with my nephews when they were little kids. There was something really important going on in those moments with my nephews. They were discovering things about themselves and they were doing that up close with their uncle who loved them. I could have won every single one of those wrestling matches. Easily. We haven't had a wrestling match in a while because they're a lot bigger now so I'm not sure how it would go today. But when they were 8 and 9 and 10 years old, I held back in those wrestling matches as they struggled with me with all their might.

There's something like that going on in this struggle in Genesis 32. Verse 25 - *Near daybreak, "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck (the best translation of this Hebrew word is "he touched", the man merely touched) (Jacob) on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with*

him." When the man merely touched Jacob's hip it was then that Jacob realized who this was. The man was holding himself back, he was limiting himself.

Verse 26 *Then (the man) said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So (the man) said to (Jacob), "What is your name?"*

(There it is, the gracious question of the God who pursues us and loves us. God knew the answer to that question but he asks it anyway. "What is your name?" That was an invitation to confession and that is a gift of grace. That was an invitation to Jacob to admit the truth about all the ways he had schemed to get his way. That was an invitation for Jacob to acknowledge all the ways he had not trusted God's promises and his love. The man asked him, "What is your name?") *"And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But (the man) said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" (Jacob, come on, you know who I am.) And there (the man) blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

You don't want to see this man's face when the sun comes up. No one can look at the face of God and live. "You know my name, Jacob. Who else could I be?" At the moment when, out of self-preservation, he should have let go of the man because the sun

was coming up, Jacob refuses to release him.

Jacob is not going to let go. He realizes that only God can give him the blessing he needs. That's true for all of us. Even if we had the best parents on the planet there is a blessing that all of us desperately need that can only come from God Himself. Jacob realizes that God is the source of his true blessing. "I don't care if it kills me. I'm holding on until you bless me." Jacob realizes that he's been trying to get God to set up his life in such a way that he will be blessed through his success or by getting the right wife or having flocks and herds. What he now realizes here in his moment of weakness is that God Himself is the blessing he's looking for.

When God asks Jacob his name, it is an opportunity for freedom because it was Jacob's opportunity to tell the truth about his life. He had lived up to the meaning of his name. He had been a heel grabber, always trying to trip others up to get his own way. When Jacob tells the truth about himself God gives him a new name. He renames Jacob and blesses him. Jacob had once pretended to be someone else to get his dad's blessing. Now he tells the truth about himself and it is finally in that moment of honesty that he receives the blessing he didn't really know he needed.

God said something to him that the text does not record. We don't know what he said. But to have God say, "You are my son, you are my daughter. I see you. I know everything about you and I love you," there is nothing better than that.

What is your name? Tell Him the truth. He wants to change your name and bless you.