

OneBodyOneFaith sermon 2017

Genesis 32:24-31:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' 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.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Friends, thank you for the privilege of this invitation in this first year of OneBodyOneFaith. It's very good to be with you, to stand with you, and to share these moments of celebration and thanksgiving.

You will remember the debate in the General Synod of the Church of England in February. In it Simon Butler made a speech of great power and in the middle of it he quoted this phrase of scripture, "I will not let you go unless you bless me". In saying this he spoke a word for the LGBTI community, a word to the wider church; we're here to stay, we're here to speak, to act, to pray, and to love. We will not let you go until you bless us.

So I chose this reading for this service, so we can see more fully what the Bible has to say through this story about people, and to people, who will not let you go until they receive the blessing.

The story is well known. Jacob is on his way to a very difficult meeting with his brother, to be reconciled after a very difficult past. He fears a violent reception and in preparation for it he sends his household ahead of him and in this story he comes to grips with God, imaged as an angel or "a man" as the Bible calls this divine figure, this wrestler, this One who stretches and engages Jacob and transforms him.

And the exchange goes like this.

They struggle and Jacob receives a real wound, a lasting wound, but he doesn't give up, and indeed the mysterious figure doesn't prevail, and then there's this exchange:

The divine figure says, "Let me go".

Jacob says, "I will not let you go until you bless me".

And the divine figure says, "What's your name?"

Jacob asks for a blessing, and instead he is asked his name. He demands that something should be done, and in return he is asked who he is.

And his name is Jacob, as Genesis 25 tells us, which says: "Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob." Jacob the grasper, the heel-catcher, the one

who came out second. It's a defining name, you might call it a curse name, a "what-do-you-expect?" name. "His name is Jacob; what do you expect?"

Identity politics is not a new thing, though it is a current thing. To be given a curse name is not a new thing though it is a current thing as so many here know. To be stigmatised and marginalised and given the message, "would you please go away so we can pretend the world is complete without you" is not a new thing. Not new to the world, and not new to you, friends. "LGBTI people; what do you expect?"

But Jacob is not ashamed of who he is and he says his name to the angel. And then the angel gives him a new name.

Being given a new name is a thing in the Bible, and the church has picked it up a lot, and in the church's hands too it can be a good thing, but not always. Because receiving a new name is not always a good thing in the world. Ask that first generation of slaves in the USA called Tom or John or Jane by their owners because their given names were too strange and too proud; or the European migrants to the US who received a new name on Ellis Island from an immigration service that couldn't be bothered to spell the name they had.

Friends, you know far better than I the way that new names can be imposed on you, and the way sometimes a transformation of who you are into some completely different person has been held out to you as some kind of Christian miracle, if only you use a new name. I'm not just talking about full-blown conversion therapy but about the constant wind blowing in some parts of the Christian family, blowing people on to the reefs of self-dislike and self-denial, offering love at a price, at the price of a naming that shrinks the person and denies the heart.

But God builds on what God has made. Simon was called Peter because in him, under the fearful fisherman, there was already the rock of the church. And Jacob was called Israel because his wrestling nature was the way God wanted him to be - in its fulness.

So some of these new-name understandings refuse to accept that God's shaping of the whole person is an act of love; in this sense they demean God's creation. And actually, slowly, the whole church is beginning to see that. If LGBTI orientation as such is part of the created order, and if homophobia is seen as always wrong - and both these things are accepted very very widely in the Church, however badly we practice what we preach - then a new conversion name which roots out or shrivels the humanity of a person cannot be acceptable.

And this passage from the first book of the Bible shows a different way. Jacob is not ashamed of who he is, and the angel gives him a new name which does not undo his being, but which sets it free from shame. 'You shall no longer be called Jacob (the grasper), but Israel (the striver), for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' You shall be called Israel, *Yiśrā'ēl*; "Triumphant with God", "the one who prevails with God".

From the heel grasper to the wrestler who prevails with God. From the curse name to the name of blessing.

And then Jacob/Israel says to God, "What's your name?" But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him."

Here it is, then. You ask God for a blessing, and God asks you your name. God gives you a fuller name that builds on creation and develops it. Then you ask God's name; then God blesses you.

In all this you grow into who you are, placed in the struggle, empowered to struggle still. Because of the struggle you learn more about who God is, and you learn to seek God more closely.

So by seeking God more closely we come to know ourselves more fully as we receive our fuller name, and we know he made us and will further fulfil us; and you know he made you and will further fulfil you.

The radical Christian Jim Wallis, whose Sojourners community is rooted in the communities of the poor in Washington DC, has a story of a little black kid in the street, and the t-shirt the kid wore which read: "God made me and God don't make no junk." Not defined by the curse name, but blessed in God.

And so it is for us all; we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Grace perfects nature. We are who we are for a purpose. God don't make no junk.

How does it work if people believe this and live it out? A colleague of mine told me the story of her friend whose gay son came out to her; the son was about twenty. His mother's first and immediate response: "How exciting!" I wish, my colleague said, I wish this was the default response of the church. How exciting! An expression of God's beauty, a jewel of His making, an enrichment to the world, a colour in the rainbow, how exciting!

That "How exciting!" world already exists, and it speaks of the God of love. And in the church - too slowly, yes, but still - more and more the wagging finger and the judge's cap are put away, and more and more we hear, "How exciting!"

How will all this end? What will the next step be for each church, and for the churches corporately? None of us can know for sure, but those of us who look to the exciting future know that it takes words, and prayers and struggle and advocacy and all that you are for and have always been for in your long history. The wrestling for which God made you, the fulfilment of that wrestling, the wounds you have received, the future that we're promised, a future of light and delight for all.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, is a leader of world stature who holds together evangelism and the struggle for inclusion, Jesus and justice. Himself a black American, he draws nourishment from the liberation struggle from slavery, and often quotes slave songs of freedom. This is one of them, and I end with some verses from it as I encourage you, wrestlers, strugglers, made in the image of God: do not let God go, do not let the church go, until you receive the prize, until you receive the blessing.

The only thing that we done wrong
Was stayin' in the wilderness too long,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

The only chains that I can stand
Are the chains of hand in hand,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Got my hand on the Gospel plow,
Won't take nothin' for my journey now,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Hold on, hold on, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

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