

“I Will Not Let You Go”

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I hate to break it to you, but Jacob was no hero. In fact, he was a pretty sketchy character. You may recall that he and his older brother, Esau were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. In those days the eldest son was meant to inherit the bulk of his father's estate. When Isaac had become an old man, his senses dimmed by all those years of desert wind and sun, Jacob, pretending to be his older brother, Esau, stole their father's blessing and with it took away his brother's birthright.

And Jacob prospered. He married well. He did a fine job of managing that stolen inheritance. His crops flourished. His flocks grew ten then twenty fold. He had eleven sons. He became a wealthy, well-respected man, a pillar of the community, and a paragon of virtue. But impressive as he was to others he never could forget the brother he had wronged.

What grief, what rage Esau must have felt when he discovered what Jacob had done. And in that rage he left his father's house and traveled faraway hoping to start a new life. He gathered around him a band of strong men. Some said

they were thugs. Some said they were robbers. In time that band of men became a mighty army. Rumors of their wrathful cruelty were whispered everywhere. When he heard the stories Jacob trembled. He knew what he had done. He must have been terribly afraid.

When we're afraid we can do one of three things. We can try to run away. Jacob knew better. We can stay put, settle into our denial and hope whatever we're afraid of will just go away. Jacob had tried that for years, long, fruitful, prosperous years but fear still stalked his heart. Or, I hate to

say it, we can turn toward that which we fear and despite our trembling, engage it.

That night when Jacob wrestled with the angel was not just any night. Having tried to run away, having tried to forget what he'd done, having sunk his life into growing a fortune in the vain hope it would blot out his guilt, he had finally decided to turn toward his fear. That night at the ford across the river gorge at Jabbock was the night before the day Jacob knew he would encounter Esau. He hoped for forgiveness. He hoped for reconciliation. He thought it far more likely he would die.

“So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him there until daybreak.” Who was that man? Was Jacob wrestling with himself? Was he struggling to reunify his own divided consciousness? He was both a thief and a patriarch. He had stolen the land but he had also made that desert bloom. It’s a familiar story. It’s a story of deception and conquest, of dislocation and new people settling in. It’s Israel and Palestine, it’s western expansion, and it’s the trail of tears. It’s the archetypal impulse behind every war. It’s the story we have to remember. “We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.”

Or was he wrestling with Esau? Was he wrestling with the only one on earth who could possibly forgive him, the only one who had been harmed enough to have the right? Having fooled his old, blind father into giving him his blessing might he not now dream of somehow earning a new blessing from the brother he had wronged. “The man said, ‘Let me go for day is breaking’, but Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” Jacob is coming to terms with his grief and yes, with his guilt. His greed drove his brother away. Isn’t it always that way? The memory of what

he did still haunts him. Only Esau's blessing will ever make his little brother whole.

Then there are those who say that Jacob wrestled God that night. We're told in the story he thought so himself. I don't know about God but I know I wrestle every day with what Lincoln called "our better angels." I wrestle every day with the knowledge that I could do better, I could do more, if only I could finally defeat that lesser selfish self inside that undermines my efforts at self-improvement and worse that magnifies my fears.

“The man said, let me go, for day is breaking, but Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. He said to Jacob, What is your name? And he answered, Jacob. Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you strove with God and with men and you prevailed.” He, who was only a man, deeply flawed, certainly no hero, turned toward his fear, wrestled for the blessing and was blessed. He became, in fact, the father of a nation; once blessed he bore that nation’s name.

And we who had hoped we could hide behind the high walls of our defense know now we must, like Jacob, turn back

toward the brothers and sisters, whose birthright has been stolen from them for our benefit. When dawn broke, Jacob crossed the river and joined his family. Together they set out to look for Esau. Genesis tells it this way: Jacob raised his eyes and saw Esau coming towards him with four hundred men; so he divided the children between Leah and Rachel and the two slave-girls. He put the slave-girls with their children in front, Leah with her children next and Rachel with Joseph last. Then he went on ahead of them, bowing low to the ground seven times he approached his brother. Esau ran to

meet him and embraced him; he threw his arms round him
and kissed him and they wept.”

This is how we can give meaning to the lives of loved
ones lost. As individuals, as a neighborhood and as a nation
we can turn toward those we fear, we can wrestle for their
blessing for once it's granted those we love will truly rest in
peace.