

Genesis 32:22-31
Matthew 14:13-21

WHEN LOSS BECOMES GAIN

A retailer was overstocked with television sets at a time when the newer models were coming on the market. How to sell these out-dated sets was a serious problem. Finally, the retailer hired a salesman and equipped him with a hearing aid. Then the boss moved his desk to a balcony overlooking the salesroom. When a customer came in to look at the television sets, the salesman would fiddle with his hearing aid and call up to the boss on the balcony, "How much is this TV set?" The boss would lean over the railing and call down: "It's just been reduced; it's three hundred and forty dollars." The clerk would look a little uncertain, nod to the customer, and fool with the hearing aid and then say, "It's two hundred and forty-four dollars. I think that's what he said." Before long all the old model television sets were sold. "There's a lesson in this," said the boss to his salesman, "you cannot cheat an honest man."

The boss had a shrewd business sense. He knew how to move his stock and solve his problem – even if his cunning plan did border on being deceitful. He showed great resourcefulness when it came to turning a problem into a profit.

As we have heard before, those were some of the same qualities lodged within Jacob, one of our spiritual ancestors of the faith. From day one, Jacob, whose name literally means, "he supplants," schemed, conned, tricked, and grabbed for all he could get from others. At birth, Jacob the Trickster, was born holding onto Esau's heel. Later on, Jacob duped Esau with a bowl of soup and a bit of bread in exchange for Esau's birthright, the rights to the leadership of the family and a double share of the inheritance. Jacob even stooped so low as to fool his own father, Isaac, who was nearly blind, into giving him the patriarchal blessing instead of the eldest son, Esau.

Naturally, Esau was furious and vowed to kill his devious brother. Jacob ran for his life. For the next twenty years, he found refuge with his Uncle Laban, who outwitted the Trickster by having him marry Leah, and then Rachel (Jacob's true love), which resulted in fourteen years of service owed to Laban. But, Jacob got even; he outmaneuvered Laban through a deceptive, selective breeding scheme and, in the process, Jacob became very wealthy.

But eventually, it was time for Jacob to quit running, to return home and fulfill God's purpose. Jacob had high hopes that he could appease his brother Esau and live in peace. Yet, the Supplanter feared for his life due to Esau's earlier death threat. As the two camps of people moved closer - Jacob with his two wives, two concubines, dozen children, and the multitude of flocks and herds, and Esau with his four hundred men - Jacob prayed to Yahweh for deliverance for himself and his family.

Now, as we know from our own experiences when we pray, sometimes God doesn't answer right away; and, when God does answer, the response may be both delayed and unexpected. Take for example the case of the man who asked God, "How long is a thousand years to you?" The Lord answered with a blink, "Just a second." "Well then," the man wondered, "how much is a million dollars to you?" The Creator and Owner of all shrugged it off as, "Just a penny." With an idea in mind, a gleam in his eyes, and a smile crawling across his face, the man asked one more question: "Lord, can I have 'just a penny?'" To which the Holy One replied, "Maybe, in just a second!"

In response to Jacob's prayer, for deliverance, Yahweh gave no immediate answer. And when God did hearken to his prayer, the response was quite unexpected. Later that night, after sending all of his gifts and family on ahead, Jacob was alone by the Jabbok River. From out of the darkness, there appeared a man and the two of them locked arms in combat, and they wrestled vigorously toward dawn. In time, Jacob realized that this was no mere mortal but God himself – "face to face."

Jacob held his own until daybreak. Then, somehow, the Other touched and dislocated Jacob's thigh. And yet, Jacob did not let go; he hung on for dear life and pleaded for a blessing. The God-man asked Jacob, "What is your name?" which actually means, "Who are you... really?" Jacob gave forth his name and, in doing so, he offered up his sordid past; he admitted to all he had done, his whole messy past. Then the Lord told him, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." When Jacob asked the Stranger his name, the latter refused that request but granted the earlier one for he blessed Jacob. Did you hear what just took place in this holy encounter? Jacob attempted to remain in control; he demanded a blessing, but he received a name; then Jacob - now Israel - demanded to know the name of the Stranger but, instead, he received a blessing. Clearly Jacob was not calling the shots; God was in control of the situation. The story ends with the mysterious disappearance of the Holy One, with Jacob's revelation that he had seen God's face and lived, and with Jacob limping forward with hope as he finally faced the music and a rendezvous with his brother, Esau.

Here's the point of this biblical story: Jacob was triumphant in defeat. His loss became his gain. When he limped away with the silver medal in wrestling instead of the gold, he won so much more instead. The Lord God broke the stubborn, self-reliant, willful Jacob and brought him to his senses. Jacob had been the supplanter, the trickster, the ambitious man who lived by his own wits. But now, he was "Israel," which means "God prevails" or "God rules." The defeat of Jacob led to the triumphant transformation of Israel; the new name signified a new self, which in turn would lead to a new and holy people being formed, through whom God would bless all others.

More than anything else, Jacob needed to understand that God was the Master of his life and not Jacob. God won the wrestling match. However, Jacob became truly victorious in defeat when he recognized the supremacy of God. What God by his grace would give him as Israel was far more than Jacob could achieve by his own best efforts. When God prevailed, Jacob prevailed. When Jacob lost the fight, he, in turn became Israel, the servant of God, and that new identity blessed him all the more. The very next day, when it came time to face his brother, Jacob was greeted by Esau with open arms, hugs, kisses, and tears of rejoicing. In fact, Jacob (now Israel), who had seen God face to face and had lived, said to Esau, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God - since you have received me with such favor." Having been reconciled to God, Israel was right on track to be reconciled to his brother. Jacob's loss became gain!

And, his story is our story as well. We too contend with God. We wrestle for control of our lives; we struggle and ask the Almighty, "Why?" in the face of evil, pain, and suffering. We want the easy way out rather than Jesus' brand of costly discipleship. We prefer our own idols, whereas God is unwilling to let go of us. We fight on and on, wrestling all night long, and even all of our lives, with the Holy One.

Part of the message of this text is that it's really okay to strive with God. We are not being unfaithful when we lock horns with the Lord. After all, God takes us where we are and helps us to grow into more of the image of God within us. When we resist God and we lose - and, by the way, we will indeed lose each and every time! - when our pride is broken and we are humbled, then and only then, God can raise us up to new levels of relationship and service with God and with all others.

Teresa Lockhard Stricklen states that God will have us whole even if it means wounding us so we can get blessed and then become a blessing. Think of the mother, who may have to chase, tackle, and even wrestle with her child in order to give the child the necessary but awful-tasting medicine, which will clear up the infection. Maybe God is like that mother; God will do whatever it takes to be God - for us, even if the Lord has to wrestle us to the ground so that we can be healed. God is going to be God, God for us, sometimes even in spite of us. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Summer 1996, p. 17)

If we live by faith and rely on God's grace, then our loss can become our gain. The Bible in general, and Jesus' teachings in particular, emphasize many paradoxes within the spiritual life. We receive through giving. We experience our greatest freedom when we become slaves or servants of Jesus Christ. We find strength through weakness, and rest through our labor. We become more alive as we die unto ourselves. We are raised up as we stoop down in true humility. And, we find ourselves by losing ourselves.

Here is the Good News: God does not leave us as we are. While we are busy choosing, and oft times choosing poorly, God is also choosing to come to us, and, if need be, wrestle with us.

God loves and cares for us enough to encounter us, struggle with us until we receive a blessing, and transform us by giving us new and abundant life, which we can then pass on to others (and receive far more blessing in return). "God engages us in battle in Jesus Christ because he wants to make us new men and women" said Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier. "It costs us something to wrestle with God, to have him hammer away at us until we reflect his will and can be worthy vessels of his blessing. The Bible repeatedly puts it in the figure of a potter with a hunk of clay, who pounds and whirls the stuff of us on his wheel, and molds us in his fingers, until he gets a pot that can offer someone a cup of water in his name." (Pulpit Resource, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 21)

Let me quickly note the Gospel reading for this Sunday, which is the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. You are very familiar with this passage as it appears in all four gospels. There is the miracle of Christ feeding the multitude with five loaves and two fish - a little food that becomes a lot of food. There is the miracle of Christ loving and caring for those who hunger that he feeds them both physical and spiritual food. There is also the miracle of how God depends on others to feed the thousands. Jesus told his disciples, "Bring the loaves and fish to me," which they did; then, after blessing the food, Jesus gave it to his disciples, who, in turn, passed it out to the crowds. Here, we see God at work, working through his disciples (then and now) to bless others. In the process, when we lose ourselves in Christ's service to others, we gain so much more.

Therefore, let us lose ourselves to God holy will in order that we may gain by being "lost in wonder, love, and praise." It's appropriate to close with the story about the man who had misspent most of his life. A friend was teasing him about it. "Say, John," he asked mischievously, "Are you still spending a lot of time wrestling with the Devil?" The fellow answered good-naturedly, "No, nowadays, I spend most of my time wrestling with God." His friend asked incredulously, "Wrestling with God? How do you ever hope to win a wrestling match with God?" John smiled and answered, "Oh, you misunderstand. In this wrestling match, I'm hoping to lose!"

When we surrender our need to be in control of our lives, when we can honestly pray, "Not my will but Thy will be done," when we acknowledge God not only as the Master of the universe but the Master of our lives as well, when we receive blessings from God and pass those same blessings on to others in the name and service of Jesus Christ, that is when our loss becomes our gain – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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