

Seeking Blessing in the Midst of Conflict
St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel

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Wouldn't it be nice to live in a world without conflict? Or so I often think. Conflict between nations, between political parties, between parents and children, conflict between intimate partners, and yes, even conflict within the church—it is all so exhausting, disillusioning, and all too often, violent, bloody, and tragic. Conflicts within the church seem especially saddening. The church, after all, is called to be the social body of the Christ, the incarnation after the incarnation, God's flesh made community, and yet, it is often the site of the most intense conflict. It is hard to miss that truth especially now as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of Episcopal women's ordination in the US, an event that took millennia of conflict to bring about. Of course, the struggle to insure full equality for women in the church is hardly finished, and so we fight on.

I find it difficult to recognize that conflicts must continue. I am a conflict avoider. If there is any way to bypass the profound discomfort that comes with a fight, I will labor mightily to find it. For reasons well known to my therapist, I am convinced that conflict will always end badly.

Now, if you've even made it into your teens with your wits about you, you know that avoiding conflict is neither possible nor is it a healthy proposition for any relationship, whether personal or sociopolitical. Conflict seems woven into the very fabric of life; those who would avoid conflict might as well seek to avoid living.

There is one form of conflict that I have not yet mentioned, one that we are largely unwilling to talk about: conflict between human beings and God. The mere mention of the topic feels taboo. We have been raised to obey not to fight. What then do we make of our reading from Hebrew Bible? In a scripture full of mysterious and inexplicable passages, few can outweird the one we encounter today. Jacob wrestles with an unknown stranger whom he comes to see as the Divine. Let us listen to this passage again and see if we might hear it afresh.

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 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.

Jacob is one of the shadiest characters in the Bible. He is a hard man to like, and the Hebrew Bible makes no attempt to pretty him up. When we meet Jacob in our story, he is on his way back home after years of living in exile. In exile, with his usual mixture of guile and determination, he has flourished and has become a very wealthy man with two wives and eleven children. But now God has told him to return to the place of his ancestors. Jacob does as God commands, but he is terrified that the consequences of his past actions are about to catch up with him. He is heading back to his brother Esau whom he has tricked, from whom he has stolen his birthright. Remember that the conflict between these two brothers began in the womb of their mother. Jacob was born fighting. Indeed, his very name means one who grasps and struggles. And now, his trickery and his striving appear to have brought him to a sticky end. He hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men—quite a welcoming committee.

At this juncture, after Jacob sends his retinue before him to Esau, he finds himself utterly alone, “And a man wrestles with him till daybreak.” Where does this man come from? Who is he? Why do they wrestle? Why does this man refuse to speak his name? And perhaps the question that intrigues me the most, “Why does Jacob dare to ask this unknown man for a blessing even after he has dislocated his hip and permanently injured him?” May I ask you a question: Do you ask for blessings from those with whom you wrestle? Who does?

Still other questions confront us: Why does this unknown and unnamed person ask Jacob for his name but then feel free to give him a new one? What gives him the right to rename Jacob? Who has the right to do that for another? We name our children, and sometimes spouses elect to share a name or hyphenate theirs. Name giving is among the most intimate of activities that human beings share. It is hard to imagine that any unknown stranger, an opponent no less, might be in a position to give Jacob a new name and thereby a new identity.

Let’s try to answer these questions with Jacob’s help. *After* not during his nightlong wrestling match, Jacob comes to believe that he has wrestled with God. Yes, God. Not an angel, nor his brother Esau as some Rabbis have suggested, not a night-demon as still other exegetes have suggested, but God.¹ But the stranger never discloses his name. He refuses Jacob’s request for his name although he does, in the end, grant his blessing.

But if Jacob is right about the identity of this nighttime antagonist, the passage becomes more mysterious and not less. How can a human being wrestle with God and come out on top or at least fight to a draw? In the narrative, the stranger does not prevail, at least not legitimately. Moreover, when day is about to break, the stranger seems compelled to leave but cannot. Jacob will not let him go. And then, the stranger strikes him, according to our translation, “in the hip socket.” Other translations say, in the “hollow of his thigh.” In either case, the stranger delivers the ultimate low blow. If this really were the divine, then God apparently does not fight fair. The questions multiply!

To begin with, I suspect this passage is very bad news for those who seek to live a conflict free life. Even when we are left alone, or perhaps especially when we are alone, the scripture teaches us that we find ourselves in mortal conflict, with *ourselves* and with

¹ I owe this litany of possibilities to oral conversation with Phyllis Tribble. July 25, 2014.

the Holy. For many and, perhaps most of us, our most fearsome opponent is the self, and so we wrestle painfully with the stranger within. There is no way to win our way to new life, no way to become who we are meant to be, to find our true name, apart from such conflict and wrestling. Alone, in the dark of night, terrified by the possibility of his own imminent death and the death of his family, Jacob wrestles with himself and with this stranger who might or might not be God.

Like Jacob, we too wrestle with the Holy in the dark of night when we are grasped by the fear of death, when the stark and inescapable truth of our mortality confronts us. Fear comes upon us when we struggle with our brothers and sisters over questions of justice and injustice, when we realize that our lives may be demanded of us. Still, few are called to martyrdom. But we are all called to die to life as we are living it now, the life to which we have grown accustomed. But that invitation to death is also disquieting and alarming. We are confronted with intense and agonizing fear whenever we face the genuine possibility that the self we have been up to this point must die if something new is to be born.

Many of us are living through such moments, moments in which something new is waiting to be born in us, but only on the condition that the old must pass away. Think for example of those who had to fight their way to a new sense of sexual orientation or gender identity. Having lived a false but socially acceptable life, imagine how excruciating it is to wake up slowly—sometimes in the dead of night—to the truth that you may have long hidden from yourself—that you are not who you have made yourself out to be.

And every artist or writer here knows what it is like to die and be born again but through intense wrestling. When you are at work on something genuinely new—a new song, a new poem, the new book—you know that the new creation will not see the light of day until the one who creates becomes new. The old artist must die before new art can emerge. In these moments of death that lead to new life, the Holy One is present, usually hidden, wrestling with you to birth the new you whose name you do not yet know, the one who is only emerging. The way to these new selves and new lives comes inevitably through anguished wrestling and heart shattering conflict.

In the most intense conflicts of our lives, whether personal, interpersonal or even political, we do not know with whom we wrestle. We are left like Jacob asking after the name of our opponent, even when the opponent turns out to be some part of ourselves. In truth, we can never hope to fully know with whom we contend. Indeed, our conflicts become problematic, demeaning and violent when we believe that we know our opponents exhaustively, when we erase the haunting and glorious mystery of the other. Our conflicts become poisonous when we claim what no person or group has any right to claim: exhaustive knowledge of our opponents. Conflict becomes degrading when I presume to know my enemy and know that she is without heart. I presume to know that my enemy is no longer human or humane. I know my enemy has nothing of the divine in her. Jacob, by contrast, wrestles while accepting that he does not know with whom he wrestles.

If we are to be like Jacob, we too must humbly foreswear the quest to comprehensively know the ones with whom we grapple. We must stop pretending that we know what motivates the intimate enemy. We disfigure, dehumanize and desacralize the ones whom we claim to know without remainder.

What if the stranger, the neighbor, and even the enemy with whom we contend might be the divine? This possibility is heralded throughout the Bible. God comes to Abraham as three visiting strangers. In the New Testament, we are instructed, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). And here, God comes to Jacob as a man—a man who is in no way marked out as extraordinary save that he is elusive and seems to know more than he should.

Jacob knows or comes to know something dear and precious, something most of us have yet to learn: the other with whom I wrestle might be the Holy One. And so when he wrestles, he does not seek to demean, dismiss, or destroy his opponent. He fights honorably and even asks for the stranger’s blessing. This capacity to ask for blessings from one’s opponent—this is the greatness and the glory of Jacob who becomes Israel.

The truth is that we can never evade or escape conflict so long as our knowledge remains partial, so long as we seek to protect our all too fragile egos, so long as we seek to mask our tender vulnerabilities, so long as we are confused about who we are. We fragile, delicate, mostly ignorant, lovely but wounded creatures cannot hope to live in a world without struggle. It cannot happen. And when we avoid forthright and honorable conflict, we find ourselves caught in dishonest, passive-aggressive, and masked conflict—conflict that has no chance of honoring our opponents or winning for ourselves any blessing.

The question is never whether or not we engage in conflict. We will wrestle with a wide range of opponents in our lives. And the painful truth is that our most wrenching conflicts will be with those whom we love the most—our lovers, our children, and our fellow churchgoers. The question is not *whether* we fight but rather *how* we fight. Everything hinges on whether we will ask our intimate and alien enemies for their blessings even as we fight with them. Will we ask for blessings or will we seek to destroy? If we ask for blessings, we will find the face of God in our enemies. But should we seek only to destroy or violate our opponents, we will be violated with them. Only the madness of mutually assured destruction comes to those who lack the capacity to contend without seeking blessing. Would that the modern-nation state that bears Jacob’s new name would remember again how to seek blessing even as it confronts its enemies.

There is another reason that we must not seek to destroy our opponents. The other with whom we wrestle often knows us better than we know ourselves. Our intimate and our alien opponents, even our political enemies, can often see what we cannot. They can see our blind spots. Often the one with whom we are caught in intimate wrestling can see what we simply refuse to see. They can see the log in our eyes while we complain about the mote in theirs. Indeed, the ferocity with which we fight our enemies is often motivated by the fact that we do not wish to see in our enemy’s eyes the truth about who we really are. Better to eliminate the enemy than to see in my enemy’s eyes the truth about who I truly am.

We stand in desperate need of our opponents and even our enemies. And when we wrestle with them, we must wrestle as Jacob does. Jacob wrestles without violating the mystery of his opponent. He does not seek to destroy because those whom we have eliminated cannot bless us. Jacob knows what you and I must come learn: it is often my enemy who knows my true nature, name and destiny. Only my opponent, intimate or alien, will tell me the truth about who I am.

The narrative of the struggle between Jacob and the unknown other who may be God ends on a poignant and troubling note. Jacob walks away with a limp, a limp that he will carry with him for the remainder of his life. However necessary and unavoidable conflict may be, and regardless of how forthrightly we engage in noble conflict, no one leaves intimate conflict unscathed. Like Jacob, we too shall have to live with a limp after conflict regardless of how we fight.

Do we not limp after our struggles with lovers who have told us things about us that we did not wish to know? Do we not limp when Native Americans stubbornly deprive Americans of the myth that we are a noble nation, a city set upon a hill, when they call us out for continuing even today to call them Redskins? Do we not limp when we see immigrant children arrive on our borders as a result of our nation's direct, violent and destabilizing interventions in their countries?

Jacob's limp is for me akin to the wounds of the Christ, wounds that remain even after the resurrection. In the Jacob story, the divine leaves the battle unscathed, but when God becomes human in Jesus the Christ, he bears in his resurrected body the piercings of spear and nail. Thomas is able to insert his hands into Jesus's open side. Only by doing so does he recognize the resurrected Christ. If even the Christ bears the wounds of a troubled world, so it must also be for us. The question that each of us must face is whether our wounds will ennoble us or diminish us. Sometimes the wounds we bear cause us to wound others. Unable to reconcile ourselves to our wounds, we wound others in turn.

But at our best, we let our wounds bind us to each other in shared vulnerability. Because I am wounded, because I have fought and lost intimate battles, I know what it means now for others to have fought and lost such battles. My wounds make me tenderhearted, they make me empathetic to the suffering of others and drive me to ease the burdens that others carry. We who have been wounded have lost our innocence but we have gained the tender wisdom that comes to those who are intimately acquainted with vulnerability.

Where then is God in all of this? Jacob teaches us that we customarily fight our battles with God without knowing it. Rarely do we go mano-a-mano with the Holy One. We most often meet with the Holy in the course of our day-to-day battles with partners, children and even our political opponents. Sometimes in the heat of struggle or shortly thereafter, we find that we have struggled not with flesh and blood but with the Divine, and we find, quite to our surprise, that we have been blessed. The Holy One may not fight fair. The Holy One may land a few low blows, and we may walk away limping. But we shall be blessed by Divinity should we engage in all our struggles by seeking blessing.

Holy One, who wrestled with Jacob in the dead of night, be with us in all our dark and lonely hours of anguished wrestling. God of Jacob, God of all who strive and wrestle, teach us to see you in the faces of all whom we oppose. Teach us to dwell and abide in mystery and unknowing never presuming to know more than we can or should about our enemies. Wrestle intimately with us, O God, and bring us into new life. Give to us new names, new identities and new selves. Oh resurrected and wounded God, give us the grace to bear our wounds, including the ones you visit upon us. Enable us to love and serve all your wounded but still lovely people. We pray this in the name of the One who was Broken for us. Amen.