

**A SERMON BY RICHARD CLEWELL**  
**“A SCOUNDREL’S SOUL STRUGGLE”**  
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**SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 32: 22-30**

Scoundrels abound in the history of humankind. The annals are filled with accounts of those who have prospered at the expense of others; clever tricksters who have manipulated and used others in pursuit of their own greed and self-aggrandizement. In the world-system there is the morality of cleverness and mind games in which success means getting the better of the other person by means of a slick business deal or an easy answer. The worst sin is letting someone take advantage of you and the worst punishment is the shame of having other people think less of you for having been “gotten over on.”

Certainly we have many examples of such unscrupulous behavior in our current world culture. Bernard Madoff runs a decade’s long Ponzi scheme which makes him billions from others’ millions who also were expecting to improve their material fortunes or comfortable retirements. Bankers and loan sharks play on people’s desire for a better life to increase their own “bottom line” greed at the expense of loanees’ homes and future. Throughout our country and the world the rich get richer and fewer, and the poor become poorer, more in number, and in hopelessness turn to the ageless alternative of retaliatory violence which destroys relationships and societies.

In contrast there is the morality of a better way, a genuinely righteous manner of relating, in which the highest good is thoughtfulness and concern for others, the worst sin is hurting another person, and the worst punishment is guilt, thinking less of yourself for what you have done.

Now when we really think about these two moralities we recognize that each of us struggles with them in our life journeys and growth. There is a piece of scoundrel in all of us as well as a part of us which is altruistic and connecting with the divine. Our Scripture text this morning focuses on the culmination of one such life-long struggle for the patriarch Jacob as related in the book of Genesis. (read Genesis 32: 22-30) The story of Jacob as it has been told in oral tradition is one which describes a life of deceit and betrayal of major proportions. He may well be the most intriguing person in the Hebrew Scriptures because we know more about him than virtually any other biblical character. More chapters in Genesis are devoted to him than any of the other patriarchs. (chp. 25-49) We see him from childhood through his death as an old man and observe his transformation from a self-

centered scoundrel to a life in touch with the presence of God and the divine way.

By way of review Jacob was born a twin, minutes after his brother Esau – in fact coming out of the womb holding on to his brother’s heel. Such uterine placement caused him to miss out on the older brother’s inheritance of that culture. Even his traditional name, Jacob, means tripper-upper or trickster. As often in tales of twin brothers, they were opposites in many ways. Esau was a man of few words, a hunter, a strong, physical “man’s man,” his father’s favorite. Jacob was more thoughtful and articulate, clever and more like his mother and thus her favorite.

In one encounter which teaches us much about the character of the two brothers, Esau comes home from an unsuccessful day of hunting, finds Jacob cooking lentil stew, and, desperately hungry, asks his brother for some. Jacob trades the bowl of stew for Esau’s birthright, that Jacob be considered the firstborn son and thus receive the greater portion of their father’s estate after his death. In this we observe Esau as ruled by his impulses and living for the moment. He says, “What good is a birthright if I die of hunger today?” as if people died as a result of missing a meal. In contrast, we see Jacob’s scheming side, a young man who will try to get by cleverness what he cannot get by birth or strength.

As the story continues in its telling, their father Isaac later has become old and blind, and believes he is about to die. He is prepared to bestow the patriarchal blessing on his favored son Esau, designating him as the one who will continue the family traditions. He is not only physically blind but also fails to recognize that Jacob, for all his limitations, is more qualified. His wife, Rebecca, fears the outcome and so devises an elaborate scheme to make sure the right brother is blessed. She dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covers his hairless arms with goatskins so that he will feel and smell like Esau, and sends him in to his blind father to be blessed before Esau gets back from the field. Jacob is uncomfortable with the ruse but carries it out and tricks his father into blessing him. Here and in the chapters following we begin to see the split in Jacob’s soul, the inner conflict between his desire to get what he desperately wants and the sense that he can get it only by doing something deceitful and then disliking himself for it. When Esau arrives and exposes his trickster brother, it is too late. The blessing cannot be withdrawn. Esau is furious and threatens to kill Jacob who takes his mother’s advice and flees to the home of his maternal uncle in another country.

As he flees Jacob’s struggle continues at Bethel where he dreams of a ladder from earth to heaven. In that dream he encounters God who promises

to be with him and that a people will increase through him, even as unworthy as he feels of the covenant promise; he finds out what it is to be on the other end of deceit and betrayal from his Uncle Laban who cheats him out of his first love Rachel whom he worked for seven years only to be given Laban's older daughter Leah, and having to work another seven years to marry Rachel; he learns to reconcile with Laban and to stand by his promise; and he raises his families and becomes very wealthy; and at this point experiences fear at the expectation of returning to his homeland passing across Esau's territory and facing the threat of death promised by his brother. Jacob sends messengers with a gift of livestock and slaves to appease Esau and receives back the word that his twin is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Out of his perplexity, he prays to God with thanks for divine faithfulness and prosperity that has come after having nothing, and trying to make a deal for protection if he is to follow the Lord's direction to return to his homeland and holding God to the covenant promise. Still he stews and again prepares a present for each of three separate groups which he sends over the border figuring that at least two might make it through safely.

And so his struggle with trusting his own cleverness or trusting in the God of his fathers comes to a head alone at night in his camp. A mysterious night figure attacks him and struggles with him until daybreak. Who is this wrestler and why do they fight to a standoff? In various mythological stories there are demons guarding boundaries or angels who guard heroes. But I believe this story is much more basic to everyone's human experience. Jacob is alone in the night and the attacker is his conscience, the part of him that calls him to rise above his self-centered impulses and need to control. The struggle is between the part of him that wins by cleverness and fraud, and the part of him that feels called by God to become transformed and to make his ladder dream a reality.

Sometimes in cartoons we see this represented by an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. In this scene Jacob is at war with himself. He struggles for control but the standoff proves he cannot do it on his own. He can take pride in his cleverness but hates himself for being a person who lies and runs. The conscience is the place where God's Spirit engages Jacob and, though wounded in this battle with himself so that he limped, he comes through it described as "shalem," a Hebrew word with connotations of wholeness, integrity, being at peace with oneself. Jacob recognizes fully God's presence and blessing. On this night there are no promises, no bargaining with God. He admits he needs God's presence with him to do the right thing and as a consequence he receives a new name, "Israel," "the one

who strives with God.” And Jacob names his campsite Peniel, “the face of God” for he saw God face to face and was saved from his former way of living and begins the journey of genuine faithfulness.

Now, we must ask why this story from Hebrew oral tradition is important for us today in the twenty-first century. Its relevance is connected to the manner we live our lives and what kind of person we will become. How do people see us? How do we see ourselves? What values do we live by?

When we block out the still, small voice of God inside us, we break connection with the relationship. Yet, God graciously takes the initiative, and often when we are most vulnerable in our daily life struggles, “taps us on the shoulder” so to speak, and enters into that struggle with us to remind us of the divine way of healing and wholeness. The words, “I will never leave you or forsake you” may mean a divine breaking into our lives, forcing a new direction for thought and action.

The Lord seeks reconciliation with us as demonstrated in this story and others in the Hebrew tradition and revealed fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. William Sloane Coffin in a 1979 sermon entitled “Wrestling with God,” declares, “God wants us to become whole and holy, to be reconciled to ourselves, so that we can be reconciled to others. That is the correct order, for we sin out of our hurts. We wound because we first have been wounded. We grasp for others’ blessings only because we have never reached for and accepted the one blessing that each one of us needs, the blessing of God himself.”

The beauty and revelation about wrestling with God’s Spirit is that no one loses. Everybody wins. Jacob is reconciled with his brother when they come together. (chp. 33) When it comes to struggles in our daily lives, we can count on God’s mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, directing us in new ways. We may have to place our life style or even our lives at risk, knowing that one “who loses his life, will find it.” God honors the relationship both by engaging in the struggle in the first place and persisting in that struggle with us all the way in these “dark night of the soul” experiences. Thanks be to God for the lesson from the patriarch Jacob and for the spirit of God who continues to inform and transform our faith journeys. Amen

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