

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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## *The Blessing*

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*Let us pray . . .*

I will not let you go, until you bless me.

That's what Jacob tells the adversary he wrestles with all night long.

And as morning approaches, this mysterious presence says, "Let me go, for day is breaking." And that's when Jacob says "I will not let you go, until you bless me."

I think Jacob was born to wrestle, while at the same time, born to move toward being settled. He and his twin Esau wrestled while growing in their mother Rebekah's womb. Scripture says the children tumbled and kicked inside her so much that she said, "If this is the way it's going to be, why go on living?" She went to God to find out what was going on. God told her,

Two nations are in your womb,

two peoples butting heads while still in your body.

One people will overpower the other,

and the older will serve the younger.

When giving birth, the first twin comes out reddish and hairy, so he's named him Esau. His brother — the star of this sermon — quickly follows, his fist tightly holding on to Esau's heel; so he's named Jacob.

Since Esau was the first born, he has the birthright, the right to his father Isaac's possessions upon his death.

But Jacob has other ideas, in fact he and his mother Rebekah seemed to be in some sort of cahoots against Isaac and Esau.

First off, Jacob — when Esau was once crazy with hunger — offers Esau food in exchange for his birthright. And then, when Isaac is on his deathbed, Rebekah had Jacob pretend he was Esau, so that in his blind and feeble state, Isaac unknowingly bestows his blessing upon Jacob.

When Esau learns of the irrevocable deceit, he flips out and vows to kill Jacob upon their father's death.

Rebekah overhears this and helps Jacob run away to be with her brother Laban until Esau cools down and forgets what was done.

Maybe Esau will cool down, but let's be real, he'd never forget.

Anyway, Jacob does go to live with and work for his Uncle Laban in another land and the story is marred in more trickery and manipulation.

For example, Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel and promises to work for Laban for 7 years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage. When the 7 years is up and the wedding feast occurs, Laban tricks Jacob and sends his first born daughter Leah into the marriage bed.

The next morning, Jacob screams at Laban — yet agrees to work for another 7 years to also have Rachel.

Laban's no fool, he's noticed that his wealth is growing nicely under Jacob's hard work, so he's totally taking advantage of the situation.

And it seems to me that Jacob is getting a taste of his own medicine when it comes to trickery and manipulation.

Anyway, another seven years goes by and he marries Rachel. Well between Rachel and Leah and their slaves, Jacob has a lot of sex and a lot of children.

Except no children for Rachel — she was barren.

But it seemed God listens to Rachel's lament, as she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son and names him Joseph. It's at this point that Jacob is ready to return to the land he came from and face Esau and so he asks Laban to give him his wives and children and let him go.

Laban and Jacob go back and forth for a bit and finally after more trickery against each other, Jacob amasses quite a flock, lots and lots of servants, not to mention camels and donkeys and other livestock and sneaks away because God says to him in "Go back home where you were born. I'll go with you."

Rachel and Leah are glad to go as well because they feel that their father Laban also treats them poorly. Well, three days later Laban gets wind of this and eventually catches up with Jacob, confronting him, wanting to know why he ran off like a thief in the night? Says if he'd have known, he'd have thrown him a huge bash!

Jacob tell Laban he was afraid, afraid that he would take his daughters away from him by brute force. He then reminds Laban that he has slaved away fourteen years for Leah and Rachel daughters and another six

years for his flock while Laban cheated him of his wages ten different times. Then Jacob declares in chapter 31:42, *If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not stuck with me, you would have sent me off penniless. But God saw the fix I was in and how hard I had worked and last night rendered his verdict.*

So Laban and Jacob set up a monument of stones and name it “Witness Monument” and make a covenant that neither will cross the line to hurt the other, vowing that the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor (the God of their ancestor) would keep things straight between them.

To seal the deal, that night they offer a sacrifice, worship and share a meal.

The next morning, Laban rises early, kisses his grandchildren and his daughters, blesses them, and sets off for home.

Now that Laban is off his mind, Jacob no doubt is consumed with thoughts of having to face his brother Esau. It’s been 20 years, and he must be wondering if Esau still wants to kill him. So Jacob sends messengers ahead to tell Esau that he’s been staying with Laban and

couldn't get away until now, but that he's acquired cattle and donkeys and sheep and men and women servants in the hopes of Esau's approval.

His messengers come back and report that Esau is on his way to meet him as well.

But he has four hundred men with him.

This scares the bejesus out of Jacob so he divides his family and slaves and animals into two camps thinking that if Esau and his 400 men destroys one camp at least the other will get away.

And then Jacob did what we all do when we feel we are in a deep of trouble. He prays his butt off! And he bargains with God!

That sort of deep emotional and spiritual work is exhausting, so after sleeping, Jacob prepares an extravagant gift for Esau: Goats, ewes, rams, camels, cows, bulls, donkeys and instructs his servants to go ahead of him and when Esau approaches them, make it clear that these are gifts and Jacob won't be far behind.

Well, Jacob must have been feeling quite anxious and restless because as another night approaches, he can't sleep, so during the night he gets up and takes his wives, slaves, children and possessions and crosses the ford of the Jabbok. Once safely settled, Jacob stays behind alone and that is the backdrop for our lesson this morning.

Jacob stays behind by himself, and a man wrestles with him until daybreak.

Given all the energy and movement, trickery and deceit, fear and unknowns across Jacob's life, given that he is preparing to face his brother's wrath, it's no wonder he has this encounter with some ambiguous figure through the night.

And clearly they are evenly matched for they wrestle all night long and toward morning, the mysterious figure asks to be let go of because day is breaking.

You'd think Jacob would have been relieved, but being the tenacious soul that he is, Jacob's replies, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Imagine that. After wrestling all night long, no doubt deep exhaustion on many levels, and a busted up hip, Jacob still wants to hold on.

Seems Jacob spent his life holding onto things. Came out of his mother's womb holding onto brother Esau's heel. He held onto trickery and deceit as a way of life through his early years. And he held onto the promises of Laban as he worked 20 years in his service.

When all was said and done, he had held onto Esau's birthright and blessing, held onto his wives and slaves and children and animals. He even held onto the promise that God was with him as he made his way back to his homeland.

But what he didn't seem to have a hold on, was peace within himself.  
And I wonder if his whole lifetime met him in his dark night of the soul  
and faced God.

I think God has a peculiar way of showing up unexpectedly and  
unannounced. And in the times of each of our lives when we are  
experiencing great fear or deep inner disruption or disturbance, I think  
we know God is present because we will be so very restless, we'll know  
dark nights, we'll be alone in a way no one else can quite understand —  
and God will be waiting in that space because not only do we have a  
God who will fight *for* us, but we also have a God who will fight *with*  
us.

We have a God who will get so close you can feel the encounter, feel  
God's breath upon your soul and find the place where recognizing that  
God is somehow present, you too will not let go until you come to some  
resolution.

Now I love this story because it's not happy and shiny where everything gets reconciled and cleanly wrapped up. There's so much ambiguity — much like real life.

In the end, although Jacob limps away from his deep encounter with God, he receives God's blessing and a new name — Israel.

In yesterday morning's e-letter, I told you that prayer reminds us that we belong to and are part of something greater than ourselves. Prayer gives us the opportunity to wrestle with God, feeling what we feel and naming those feelings before God, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey.

So when it's all been too much, bring it all to God to wrestle it out. Life is going to unfold how it will. Sometimes by our choices, sometimes by life's forces. Just remember, there is nothing God hasn't seen or heard before.

And while God might be awfully silent sometimes, have faith, because God is there in your deepest and darkest places waiting to encounter you — and that's the truth of a blessing in which we all participate.