

Devotion: July 29, 2020

Genesis 33:22-31

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[a] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel,^[b] saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel,^[c] and he was limping because of his hip.

While attending Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC, I used to walk down to the National Cathedral which was located about a mile from my dorm room. And one the things that surprised me was that the body of Helen Keller is buried inside the cathedral.

Do you remember the beautiful story of Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan? Helen was born blind and deaf. It was a huge challenge to establish communication with her, teach her, and help her to develop the distinctive gifts which were hers. A lesser person than Anne Sullivan could not have done it. It was a struggle from the very beginning. The two of them literally wrestled with each other from time to time as the tedium and the frustration grew.

It was the story of Jacob all over again. Finally they established a method of communication of tapping out letters of words on the lips. And, the first words Helen Keller tapped out on Anne's lips were, "I love you." Not only did their wrestling with one another produce two remarkable human beings, their shared struggle also led to a lifelong, close, caring relationship. That's the way it works!

Of course, struggle does not automatically and inevitably lead to growth. It does not always take us in good directions. We all know people who have allowed difficulty to make them bitter and resentful. Instead of growing, they regressed.

We don't have any choice about whether or not our lives will be touched with difficulty. They will be. You can count on it. Our choice is about what we will do with the difficulty once it comes. Victor Frankl a holocaust survivor and writer, called it the last human freedom. It is the freedom to decide what our attitude will be in any given circumstance. Okay, here is the difficulty. Here is the struggle. What are you going to do with it?

When Jacob was in his wilderness, he encountered God. And the two of them went at it. And out of it, Jacob received a blessing. One reason struggles often lead to blessings, is that in struggle we recognize our limitations and our weaknesses, so, we reach out for resources beyond ourselves. It's just as Paul said, "*When I am weak, I am strong.*"

Paul is telling us that when we think we are strong, we have only our own strength, our own resources, and in the face of life's difficulties, that is really weakness. But, when we realize our limitations, we open ourselves to God and all the resources of faith, and then we can become strong.

We have all been through a lot this past year. And every one of us has experienced difficulties in our personal lives and in the lives of loved ones. How do we cope when the difficulties of life attack us? On what foundation do we stand?

Here is what I believe. This is the foundation on which I stand. I believe that God is. I believe that God is like Jesus. His name is love. And in every moment of every day He is at work for our good. His powerful hands took a crucifixion and turned it into a resurrection. And He can do it again and again. No matter what problems we encounter, no matter what struggles we face, there is absolutely nothing that God and us together can't handle. If we are open to it, out of every difficulty God can bring growth. Out of every struggle God can produce a blessing!

A famous hymn says it:

*"Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."*

Do you see it? By the grace of God, every struggle can be used for blessing. I believe that. I trust that! Because I have experienced that!

Prayer: Father, we don't like the struggle. But we trust that there is nothing in life that You cannot use for good. So, in every difficulty, help us to turn to You. Take our weakness and make it strength. Take our struggles and turn them into blessings, as You did with Jacob, and Jesus, and Jim. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen