

Wrestling with...?  
Reading from the New Testament: Mark 10:35-40

From the window of my office, I saw him storming down the sidewalk, and I thought... Well, use your imagination. He was hot, like bowed up, scorch and burn, take no prisoners, leave no witnesses kind of hot. Was it my imagination or were those heat waves creating an aura around him like those you see emanating from the hood of your car at high noon on a horrifically hot day (*You know, September in NC*)?

After two lengthy debates, the Session of the small church I was serving had refused a request his wife had made for use of the property. He had a right to be mad. We had given a preliminary approval, but after much debate, had voted to reconsider and refuse the plan. I was young, inexperienced, and trying to hold on to a tornado with a kite string. I didn't know anything (*As if you were not already aware of that*).

I did know he wouldn't take the news well; that there would be a reckoning. I just didn't know it would happen so fast. If the sight of him stomping down that sidewalk had a soundtrack, I imagine it would have been from the shower scene in *Psycho* – Screech! Screech! Screech! The appropriate prayer at that point would have been, “Lord, preserve my

life.” But I was too busy calculating if it would be worth diving under my desk.

In the blink of an eye we were face to face, and mercifully, mine wouldn’t require reconstructive surgery, particularly since he was the town’s plastic surgeon. No violence, emotion faded, and the church weathered the crisis, but the memory remains vivid.

Have you ever faced a reckoning before? Those interminable moments between *Wait ‘til your father gets home* and lights in the driveway. You took the test and you know it was bad, but you are waiting to see just how bad. You were going 55 in a 35 zone, and the question of whether you escaped notice has been answered by the blue lights in your rearview mirror. Or this, you are managing three crises at once, and just when you think you might make it, a fourth crisis shows up, and like the loser at Jenga, you can see the tower starting to implode.

If you know what I’m talking about, let me introduce you to Jacob. Jacob is like a melding of BBC’s DCI Luther, *Wolf of Wall Street*’s Jordan Belfort, *Bonfire of the Vanities*’ Sherman McCoy, and Richard

Nixon, all scrambling like Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz in the candy factory – in way over their heads and hoping nobody finds out. Jacob is a schemer. Jacob is a con man. Jacob is greedy and opportunistic ... and Jacob's in a jam, homemade, but sticky, nonetheless.

Jacob is not the victim of circumstance, bad luck, or unwarranted consequences. No, Jacob has well-earned the trouble he's facing. He's been disturbing the peace since he was in-utero, giving Rebekah fits. We read in Genesis that the twins "struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" In the maternity ward when Jacob realizes he's not at the front of the line, he grabs his brother's heel and tries to pull him back, and in a way Jacob doesn't let go until years later, after he has managed to con his brother Esau out of his birthright and con his blind father Isaac out of Esau's blessing. And guess what? Esau is ticked ... infuriated ... itching to give Jacob a lethal dose of shock and awe.

So, where's Jacob? Gone, and by the time Esau gets to the train station, all he can find, all he's left with is a rotten little note written in Jacob's handwriting. *See ya! Wouldn't want to be ya!* Consider the

blessings erroneously conferred by their blind father as a result of Jacob's con:

Jacob's blessing procured by impersonating Esau? "May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers..."

So, what sort of blessing is left over for Esau now? "Away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother." *Gee, thanks!* So, what do you think Esau has in mind for Jacob should he meet him again?

Fast forward with our heel-grabbing, estate stealing, identity thieving friend some 20+ years, two wives, and twelve children by four mothers (*It's complicated*); throw in a couple of schemes gone wrong and troubles with the in-laws and we find Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok River. Jacob, the con man, is going home, and though home may be where the heart is, the way there may mean crossing paths with Esau.

Uh-oh. He has an angry father-in-law behind him and a vengeful brother in front of him, not to mention the unavoidable drama/chaos of his own small town of a family riding along in the Winnebago with him. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, when the usually loquacious, hairnet wearing fugitive, Everett, has the law in front of him and the fire behind him, all he can manage to utter over and over again is, "... We're in a tight spot." Well, so is Jacob, and in an effort to defraud, or at least buy himself out of trouble, Jacob sends messengers out to make an offer or strike a deal with Esau. But would you trust an offer from Jacob, particularly if you've been burned twice before? Thus, the messengers return with this ominous, cryptic message: "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

"...We're in a tight spot." Jacob, the text tells us, is "greatly afraid and distressed." So, Jacob being Jacob, he quickly conjures up this bright scheme: Yeah ... I'll promise Esau a big ol' bribe, basically a ranch along with a petting zoo. Maybe that will appease him ... On second thought, I'll pack this whole soap opera cast of a family into the

Suburban and put them between Esau and me. “See ya, kids. I’m behind you all the way.” Nice ... right?

Human shield in front of him. Burned bridges behind him. Jacob has painted himself into a rather small box, but at least he’s alone, right? Finally, peace and quiet in a life defined by chaos and contention. Or, could it be that now is the worst time to be alone and left without the chaos to distract you from any real self-reflection on the choices and missteps that brought you to this place, on the wounds you’ve inflicted, the people you’ve hurt. But does Jacob have the capacity for that kind of reflection? In his plea to God, we do not see remorse for the consequences others have endured because of him. No sorrow for his wrongs, just the fear of getting caught, fear he won’t escape this time.

Oh well, at least the solitude will give Jacob the chance to rest, right? Wrong! Before Jacob can cue up his yoga video, he finds himself in the ring with a masked Luchadore, going the full three falls before dawn, wrestling to a draw. We already know that Jacob is a veteran wrestler, experienced at grappling in tight spaces even before he was born. But this mysterious opponent is at the least, equally formidable, but who is it? Is it God? Is it Jacob’s conscience, assuming he even has

one? We cannot finally say, but we do know the masked marauder has the power and means to confer blessing, a blessing that sticks and will not be cast aside. We also know that Jacob will do anything to secure a blessing.

While Jacob may have preferred a throne or at least one of those big checks they give out at golf tournaments and telethons, the blessing he receives is a new identity, Israel, which literally means one who strives with God; and for his trophy, Jacob gets a limp.

That's an odd blessing. But think about it, particularly if the giver is the Lord. Jacob demands a blessing, but before the giver confers it, Jacob must speak his own name. Do you know what Jacob's name means? One who grabs, heel grabber. Before receiving the blessing, Jacob must confess, face up to who he really is, the one who grabs without thought of the price others have to pay or suffering others may have to endure; the one who rationalizes his misdeeds; lies even to himself about his motivations; acts with impunity to grab all he desires with limited capacity for compassion.

In other words, at various intersections of our lives, Jacob is you; Jacob is me. The confessions of sin we recite each week are not just extraneous space fillers in worship but are integral to worship itself. Before we can hear who God calls us to be, we need to be honest about who we are. The mystery mauler in our text today knows Jacob must hear the sound of his own name in a way that forces him to confront who he is, before he can become who he was created to be.

“I am Jacob.” With those words, the schemer, con-man, narcissist, so blind to others’ need if it gets in the way of what he wants, is finally cornered and exposed in a way that even he can no longer deny it.

We live in a world today where boorish behavior, unapologetically offensive insult, self-flattering affluenza, and craven agendas are not only abided, but applauded, even revered to an extent that it says far more about us than it does the offenders. It is an era when honest self-reflection is rare and responsibility is ignored precisely when both are desperately needed for the future we shall share. Jacob finally must confess who he is. Will we as a culture find the strength and courage to do the same?



Note that once Jacob can confess who he is, the Lord reveals to him, or at least it finally becomes clear to him, who he can become. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The Lord doesn't cast Jacob off for who he is and what he has done. Rather, the Lord claims him as he is and redirects him toward what he shall become.

Doesn't Jesus do the same for us each time we gather at the font. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." In baptism, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection – we die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ. In baptism, we are called to a new way of life, in Christ's name and as Christ's disciples.

Yes, you may be Matt, or Ann, or Tim, or Reese, bearing all the complexities and blemishes and missteps allied with your name. But you are more than that. You are Christ's and as such, your life involves a whole lot more than just you. Into the world you are called and into the world you shall go. Just remember your baptism. Always remember, before you speak, before you act, even while you are at rest, you are wearing Christ's name, too. Does it show? Amen.