

Andria Irwin
“The Pain of Praise”
Genesis 32: 22 - 31
October 20th, 2019
Trinity United Church

Please pray with me: God we come to you struggling. Struggling to hear you, to see you, to know you, to serve you, and to better be beacons of your light in this world. May we find rest in your words of blessing this morning. And may the words of my mouth and meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

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When I was 12 years old I was confirmed into the Anglican church. Confirmation was a process by which I affirmed as my own person, that all the promises I was baptized into as an infant, I was still ready and wanting to uphold. As was custom in my tradition, the confirmation came with a gift. My parents gave me a beautiful cross necklace. The Bishop gave me a certificate of faith. And my church gave me a bright pink, leather-bound Teen Study Bible.

In the front of this Bible was a page of identifying questions, posed to help locate me in my faith journey at that time. There were blank spaces for the names of my family and friends, questions about my favorite bible verse, about what I wanted to be when I grew up and one question that said, “what do you think is your best feature?”

I filled this front page out diligently on the day I received this Bible. I can tell because all my I’s have hearts over them which is something I’m fairly certain I knocked off by the time I was in 9th grade. I loved this Bible. It is highlighted cover-to-cover. Needless to say, I have kept it, despite the fact that pink isn’t so much my go-to color anymore.

When my husband and I first moved in together we had the big ‘merging of the things’ event and as two book lovers we spent a lot of time unpacking our library and flipping through each other’s books, all underlined with love, some dedicated to us, some dated, some with pressed leaves falling out from between the pages. And it didn’t take long for Steve to pick up the glowing pink Bible and open to that first page where he read that my name was Andrea Parker, that my favorite color was pink, that my favorite scripture was Jeremiah 33:3 (which I know for a fact I just wrote down because I saw it on a U2 album cover), and this was also where my husband learned that my favorite feature about myself was my — and I quote — my “excellent karate.”

Now, I have not done karate since I was about 12 years old and I’m fairly sure that’s also the age at which I took it up, but for some reason, at that time in my life, it was an identifying feature. The confidence I had in my roundhouse kick was just staggering, because I assure you, there was

nothing excellent about the behavior I exhibited for 30 minutes every Saturday in a church basement under the instruction of some guy named Tim. But I wrote it in my Bible. And 18 years later my husband found that Bible. And now, whenever life gets ... a little hard ... I have to hear that man say, “you should have no problem with it, after all, God knows you have excellent karate.”

I have my doubts that Jacob’s karate skills were any better than mine — when it came to technique and placement and defensive blocking, I imagine Jacob flailing more than striking. Jacob strikes me as scrappy but not so finessed. And yet this is a story about a man who walked away victoriously from an encounter in the Divine dojo.

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We meet Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok river, the night before he is set to reunite with his brother Esau. Twenty years have passed since Jacob stole Esau’s birthright and petitioned God to let him escape with his life. For 20 years Jacob hasn’t known how Esau feels about the whole thing. He assumes, most likely correctly, that Esau might want to retaliate in some way. And as the family gets closer and closer to the meeting place we can already sense a struggle brewing.

But there is something else we need to consider here, at this point in Jacob’s journey. And that is the *possibility* of Jacob’s reform.

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There is a woman in the United States by the name of Catherine Hoke. She has been dubbed by the media the ‘Master of Second Chances’ because of a non-profit she started that focuses on giving rehabilitated convicts the skills to reenter the workforce when they’re released from prison. These people are then set with jobs and mentors once they have served their time so that they don’t need to suffer the prejudices of people who don’t know the whole story. I heard Catherine give an interview a couple of years back and she said something I’ll never forget: **what if the only thing you were known for was the worst thing you had ever done?**

Twenty years have passed since Jacob swindled his way into the family inheritance, and while we can’t say for sure how he has changed, we know he’s not the same. He couldn’t be. None of us could. The decisions we make in our lives — especially the poor ones — they don’t leave us unmarked.

I don’t know if you have ever had the experience of trying to prove to someone who has known you that you have changed. If you have, you might understand the series of choices Jacob makes when he reaches the Jabbok. He sends his wives and his children ahead, most likely with gifts of

hospitality held out before them, to break the ice. To start to paint Esau a different story. And then Jacob makes the decision to stay behind. Just one more night. Alone. To figure it out.

To those on the other side of the river, Jacob is a liar, a manipulator, a conman, a grabber of whatever he wants, whenever he wants it. He is selfish and careless and greedy and smart in all the sociopathic ways we're told to watch out for. He is a cheater and he is a threat.

When people have perceived notions of us — especially when they're well deserved (and I hazard a bet we have all been someone's Jacob at some point) — it is extremely difficult to demonstrate personal transformation. One could guess Jacob was planning on busying himself with some imaginary conversations. Trying out different phrasing and tones until he found one that sounded real, but not too sensitive. One that said "I'm reformed, but not a pushover."

But Jacob doesn't get to have those conversations. Instead, our scripture says, "a man wrestled with him until daybreak."

This man appears out of nowhere. This wasn't a sneak attack. It is as if a man came forth from within Jacob himself. The Hebrew word for wrestled is *ye'hbek* a short few syllables away from Jacob's name: *y'acob*. Perhaps this play on words is trying to tell us something ... this wrestling Jacob is faced with ... is it all within himself?

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I'm sure we are all too familiar with the midnight wrestling that takes place when our conscience isn't clear. Whether we are suffering from guilt or shame, a hard decision, a temptation, a fever that won't break, a heart that won't stop breaking, we know the wee hours of the morning like we know ourselves. They are long, they are lonely, and the struggle feels anything but holy.

But when Jacob is faced with this struggle we do not see him tossing and turning as a way to will himself back to sleep, no, he tosses and turns with the ferocity of a man whose life is at stake. He is struck and still he struggles. His bones are disjoined and still he struggles. The sun begins to rise, and still he struggles. The attacker himself says "let me go!" and still he struggles.

Bless me! He cried. I will not let you go until you bless me! Transform me. Forgive me. Fix me. Let me feel worthy of your love.

Jacob, a grabber of whatever he wants, whenever he wants it, cries out into the night for the one thing he cannot take for himself: God's providence.

And the force in the night asks him for his name. Jacob. And says, “you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed [...] and the sun rose upon him as he passed the place where he saw God face-to-face, limping because of his hip.”

No longer did Jacob have to fear the other side of the river. He was emerging completely transformed. Not only was his spirit different, not only was his sight different, but his walk was different — marked by a struggle with God so fierce that the joints of his body sung with the pain of praise.

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Maybe some of you here have experienced this kind of praise. The guttural gratitude that rises up out of your throat, exhausted by the miracle of childbirth. The perfect goodbye with a loved one that somehow was enough, even though there could never be such a thing. The voices of justice ringing out together in the face of violence and marginalization and condemnation. Bless us! We deserve your blessing! Bless us! The support system that gathers at the top of the cliff, overlooking your rock bottom, forcing you to climb with blistered fingers out of the depths of your addiction, your depression, your humiliation, your failure. Our praise does not have to be pretty — it just has to be real. And we know it’s real when we walk away, limping like Israel. Limping because we have just danced joyfully under the moon or because we have been struck by the paternal ferocity of a God whose compassion is not always kind.

But one way or another we emerge from this faith as marked by God. Marked as a sign to the world of the Kingdom. A sign that we have been changed. Not by some magic turn of events, not by the external successes of our material lives, not by a flimsy commitment made under pressure but a change that is characterized by the day-to-day struggle to understand our sufficiency for God’s blessing. We emerge marked, as the hands of Christ were marked by the pain of his praise. Marked by the grace of God. A God who gave *everything* to fight for us.

So you see, despite what we may have been taught in Sunday school or on Christian get well soon cards, this story reminds us that we don’t have a God who holds us gently while we falter in faith. But what we have is a God who wrestles us, kicking and screaming, into surrendering to a life we didn’t feel worthy to fight for. God’s grip is stronger than our guard. God’s promise is stronger than our punch. God’s hope for us is stronger than our headlocks — God can handle our struggle.

And when we allow ourselves to show the markings of our encounters with God, we are no longer slaves to the selves we once were. Your high school best friend, your ex-husband, your

arch nemesis, the woman you cut off in traffic on your way to church, your own identity of shame — they don't know you anymore. You are called by a new name.

Like Jacob, we emerge having struggled to *take* a divine blessing only to realize that blessing was freely given in the first place.

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I have a grown up bible now. Its cover is black and floppy and there is no questionnaire in the front. But if you open up the first page you will see a statement of faith. It says: "This bible belongs to Andria Irwin. She is excellent at karate, thanks be to God."

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We cannot emerge from a divine encounter unscathed. But that struggle, that fight, that back and forth in the dark is nothing to be ashamed of. God knows exactly how painful praise can be. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" But so too does God know the peace that comes with our surrender: "into your hands I commend my spirit." And the life everlasting that follows.

We may limp, but we are not to confuse that with having lost. We have a new name now. *The whole people of God*. And friends, she is so worth fighting for.