

“Get Real”

Years ago Randy Newman wrote a song that I’ve always thought is about sex. “Maybe I’m doin’ it wrong. Maybe I’m doin’ it wrong. But I don’t think I’m gettin’ what everyone’s gettin’. Maybe I’m doin’ it wrong.”¹ Probably it *is* about sex. But it could just as well be about church.

Whenever I’m surfing channels and I stumble over fancy-dressed and elegantly coiffed preachers, a little piece of me gets to wondering. How come I don’t look like this guy who gets better looking every day? I walk through airports and see piles and piles of books with a grinning evangelist on the cover and promises of inner peace, marital bliss, financial blessing and I think, is that how it works? Are these the inevitable fruits of faith? They make it sound so simple: follow the formula and blessings will wash over your life. Maybe I’m doing it wrong.

But the gospel of prosperity has never seemed to me to be anything other than a shallow perversion of faith; a high-jacking of Jesus in service of an anxiously acquisitive culture. Jesus becomes one more self-help commodity to make unworkable lives almost work. On my good days I hope that this message attracts people who then are helped to move more deeply into genuine faith.

A far more compelling image for faith comes from this morning’s lesson from Genesis: the figure of Jacob grunting and sweating and rolling around in the dirt and holding on for dear life until he’s completely exhausted; then limping off into the sunrise with a new name and a much deeper sense of meaning, to face head-on the mess he’s made of his life. That seems real to me; and the summons to faith above all is an invitation to get real.

This moment of truth for Jacob has been coming on for a long time. Facing reality is his absolute last resort. The name “Jacob” means “supplanter;” and from the moment he was born as the second of twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, he worked at supplanting his older brother, Esau. As the firstborn, Esau was entitled to all of their father’s inheritance; Jacob maneuvered Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of stew. As the firstborn, Esau was entitled to their fathers’ blessing; with the help of his mother, Jacob dressed in Esau’s clothes, glued goat hair on his hands and lied through his teeth to trick his blind and dying father into giving *him* Esau’s blessing. Jacob is a dishonest schemer. And after this treatment, his older, larger, stronger, hairier brother wants, literally, to kill Jacob. The last time Jacob saw Esau he was not sitting on a see-saw; he was carrying a chainsaw with a strange, homicidal gleam in his eye.

So Jacob did what any self-respecting mama’s boy would do: he fled. I think of a line from Woody Allen’s movie, *Love and Death*. It’s a spoof of *War and Peace*, and Allen plays a Russian peasant living under threat of French invasion. Diane Keaton asks in great agitation, “Boris, if the armies come, what shall we do?” He replies, “Natasha,

¹ Randy Newman, *Maybe I’m Doing It Wrong*, January Music (BMI), 1970.

we shall flee! I am a three-time European freestyle fleeing champion!” Jacob could have given him a run for his money!

Jacob’s flight took him to Haran and the country of his mother’s brother, Laban. And for a time he seemed to get his comeuppance. Jacob fell in love with Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel, and worked seven years for the right to marry her. But at the marriage feast Laban pulled a switch on Jacob and he woke up the morning after with the elder daughter, Leah. A week later he was allowed to marry Rachel, as well—they really believed in marriage in those days and had as much of it as they could—but he had to work another seven years for the second wife. Altogether, considering how he’d treated his brother, you’d have to say Jacob had it coming.

Jacob and his two wives and their two maids all get to work making babies, and by the time we get to today’s lesson they have produced eleven of the thirteen on which the five of them will eventually collaborate. But Jacob grows restless and is fed up with working for his Uncle Laban. He don’t wanna work on Laban’s farm no more. He wants to be on his own. So he cuts a deal with Laban, now fresh out of daughters as bargaining chips, that Jacob will be allowed to keep some of the sheep that are born on his watch. He gets Laban to promise to give him all the striped and spotted sheep; then he interbreeds them in such a way that the vast majority of lambs come out spotted or striped. If you actually *read* this part of Genesis, never mind that it says that they were spotted or striped because Jacob contrived to have the sheep look at spotted or striped poles while they were breeding; this was a long time before Gregor Mendel and modern genetics. The point is that Jacob pulled a fast one on Laban and got rich at his expense.

As Laban is just about to figure out what happened Jacob resorts to what he does best, and he flees—in this case back toward his homeland. Laban chases him down after three days and there is a very tense confrontation. They argue back and forth heatedly, and finally reach an agreement: they erect a pillar of stones and agree that neither will pass this pillar to do harm to the other. It’s a precarious arrangement; and Jacob heads toward home looking back over his shoulder.

And then he receives word that Esau is in front of him. This is not good news. All the time that Jacob has been playing the Newlywed Game and producing progeny and wheeling and dealing with Uncle Laban, Esau has been on steroids. He now commands a mighty army, and Jacob has nowhere to run.

The best strategy he can devise is to line up all his people and his possessions, his wives and children and flocks and herds and send them ahead toward Esau with instructions to present themselves to Esau as gifts from his dear brother, Jacob, who is somewhere toward the rear. If you can’t beat ‘em, buy ‘em. So all Jacob’s entourage goes on ahead across the River Jabbok. Jacob stays behind alone as night falls.

He wrestles all night, although the precise nature of his adversary is not clear. Our translation says simply, “a man.” The more pious King James says it was an angel; scholarly speculation suggests this ancient story comes from a time when each locality had its own shadowy spirits and demons. Whatever it is, Jacob has plenty to wrestle with, and spends a long night.

We're on dangerous ground I suppose when we bring too much of our own psychology to a story like this one; but that's a tough temptation to avoid when we've all spent our own lonely times in the wee small hours churning with demons of our own creation. In Jacob's case there's a lot going on, largely through the weight of the promise he has inherited. His grandfather Abraham had had a vision from God that included the promise of many offspring, a promised land, and the assurance that through Abraham's descendants all the families of earth would come to know God and be blessed. In the context of Genesis this promise to Abraham represents God's new beginning for creation. And that promise has been passed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. In a sense it's the weight of the world.

Is it time now for Jacob to grow up? Is it time for him to face up to what he did to his brother? Is it time for him to be who he is and let the promise live in him and through him in whatever way it will? Or is it time for him to die? What will the daylight bring?

It's funny how these things look in the wee small hours, isn't it? It's funny how the demons jump up to accuse and condemn us, how we can catastrophize and worry ourselves into a lather, carrying on imaginary conversations and acting out dramatic confrontations in the theatres of our mind. Whatever Jacob is doing, we can relate on so many levels.

Give him this: he doesn't quit. He keeps on wrestling, and even seems to have the upper hand in a sense, although the ease with which his adversary disables him makes us wonder how even a match it ever was. Seeing that Jacob isn't about to give up, the unidentified wrestler dislocates his hip. But even at this Jacob does not relent and holds on for dear life. His opponent says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob will not accept a night of pointless wrestling, grinding and churning to no result. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." I will not have gone through this for nothing.

So Jacob receives a blessing in the form of a new name. "What is your name?" the adversary asks. "Jacob," replies the old supplanter. But that is not who he is any more. He will no longer be defined by what he has stolen from his brother, but by the struggle he has been through to arrive at a deeper truth about himself. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Or at least he has survived.

So it is wrestling with God that defines Jacob. And it is wrestling with God that defines the people of God, Israel. It's an odd sort of blessing. But it's the only sort of blessing that really rings true: not an outcome but an interaction; not an arrival but a journey; not a finished product but a work in progress. That's what it means to be in relationship with God. That's what it means to be one of the people who inherit God's promise, a child of Israel.

We never really do find out who Jacob's adversary was; it's unclear to the very end of the story. And that feels right to me, too. For oftentimes in hindsight we discover that what we were wrestling with was not a demon or even an adversary at all; it was more like what happens when a snake sheds its skin. There was a new self being born through all that wrestling, a new reality about to be embraced, a new day dawning.

The biggest surprise of all is that Esau welcomes his wayward brother home. Justice, it turns out, is not merely revenge; sometimes true justice—God’s justice—is forgiveness, which has the power not merely to punish, but to transform the wrongdoer. Like the father in Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son, Esau embraces his unworthy brother—now not the supplanter but the wrestler—and they cling to each other and they weep. Separated though they have been by the lives they have led, neither can be who he is without the other. That’s a fearful, tearful, wonderful truth we all keep learning over and over.

Maybe God is there in all our wrestling as the opponent. But usually to me it feels as though God is the one who is simply there with us all along as we wallow in a mess of our own making; and there as well as we emerge into a rare moment of clarity and newness. God is there with us as we go through the anguish of facing up to ourselves and getting real. Who am I? What am I here for? What really gives my life meaning and purpose? What do I really care about? Who really cares about me? God is present for all of it.

That’s why the table may be the best symbol of all to help us think about our life in faith. God is as near as the bread that nourishes us, as near as each breath we take, as near as the truth to which at last we come home, however haltingly.

If it seems that simple—and that complicated all at the same time—maybe you’re doing it right.

Amen

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