

***We Make the Road by Walking***  
***Biblical Brothers: Rivalry and Reconciliation***  
Genesis 32:22-31

There's a Native American story that goes like this:

One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave was sitting with his grandson, telling him stories about his life. As he told those stories about himself as a young man, he confessed, "Sometimes I think there is a fight going on inside of me between two wolves who live there. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, ego. The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith."

The grandson thought about this for a minute and then he asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins the fight?"

And his grandfather replied simply, "The one I feed the most."

There is great truth in that story. I think we all have battles--wrestling matches--going on inside of us, much of the time. A battle between the kind, generous, selfless, disciplined self we want to be and want others to see in us; and that other person that lives inside of us, the one that shows up with judgment or a lack of self-control or anger or resentment just below the surface. If we are "normal", this battle is going on all the time. If we are paying attention, we can see it.

My own internal battle was raging this last week. I had coffee with someone who was part of a work situation I left some years ago because I felt I had not been treated fairly. I'm still pretty sure I was right. Other people have told me they think that too. Every time they tell me that it makes me feel good--like I can justify the anger I still feel about what happened. But my friend has stayed and has worked at making that organization better. As we were talking, he started to tell me about the person who is just about to take the position I held, someone I don't know at all. I could feel myself getting kind of steamed up every time he said something complimentary about this new person. When my friend asked me, at the end of our conversation, if I would be willing to meet with the new staff person, to help him do well in his new job, I said, with my very righteous huffiness, that I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. The truth is, there's a side of me that doesn't want this new person to be good, or to succeed there. I wanted my friend to acknowledge, one more time at least, that I had been a victim, and that I deserved to be angry.

... Which seemed perfectly reasonable to me until I went to bed that night and thought about my day, and how I had shown up in that conversation. With a little bit of distance I could see that there is this part of me that is holding on to my victimhood, that gets some comfort out of still feeling hurt—especially if other people affirm that I deserve to feel that way. But is this the wolf I want to feed? It locks that other wolf—the generous and forgiving one--in a cage, so that it can't get out and it cannot grow or get stronger.

This road we are walking on, this pathway to being fully alive, is a pilgrimage, a path that others have walked before us. We do well to pay attention to the experiences that shaped *them*, and the

markers they left behind. That's why, every week, we start with the Bible, the ancient stories of those who got glimpses of the same God we are seeking.

Those two wolves the Native American grandfather was talking about appear in many of the Bible's stories. Often they appear as two different characters in the stories. Think about how many stories there are in the Bible of sibling rivalries. Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. One of them killed the other out of jealousy. Jacob and Esau; Jacob cheated his older brother out of his inheritance. Joseph and his eleven brothers, who competed for their father's affection. The Prodigal Son—the story Jesus told about the delinquent son whose father welcomed him home no matter how much he had screwed up, and the older brother who couldn't get past his resentment over his brother's undeserved forgiveness.

There's a pattern to these stories, clear enough that we ought to pay attention. Over and over, these stories end the same way: the younger brother—the *lesser* brother, the one who is weaker or had disgraced himself in some way—ends up being the one who *gets it*, the one who discovers some truth or is able to accept and internalize a gift that changes his life for good.

The story we read a few minutes ago, about Jacob wrestling all night, is one of those stories. In the middle of all the shorthand, sketchy stories in the Bible, where we have to fill in the details for ourselves, this story has one scene that gets stretched out in slow motion, so that we can see the inside of the transformation process. *Pay attention*, it says. And so we shall.

Jacob has been out of his home country for years. He left because he had no choice; if he hadn't, his older brother Esau would have killed him for lying to their father on his deathbed and cheating Esau out of his inheritance. Jacob left as a young man; he is returning in middle age. In between, he has used his natural abilities—his cleverness, his wit, his strategic thinking, to accumulate the things he wanted. Jacob practiced never letting someone else get the better of him; he always had the quick answer, the clever way to maneuver around other people. But there was a cost to living this way; there's a sort of shame in knowing that all those other people you've gotten ahead of think less of you for the way you pushed them aside.

Always--although it was buried deeply--there was another side of Jacob. A voice inside of him that knew a different morality: that the highest good includes goodness toward others even while you're pursuing what's good for you. Jacob had lived with these two sides of himself for a long time. Now he wanted to return home—maybe out of longing to finally become his better self.

At the moment this scene opens, Jacob is almost home. He is just across the river from the land where his brother Esau still lives. The night before, Jacob had sent messengers to Esau to announce his arrival. He also sent gifts: animals, slaves, blankets, food—anything that might appease whatever anger Esau may have held onto for twenty years. This is a clue to us, as hearers of this story: Jacob is still living out of that wary, self-promoting self: if he can manipulate his brother into peace, maybe he won't have to face the anger that he deserved. A message came back: Esau was on his way to meet Jacob—and he was bringing 400 of his best friends with him. Jacob didn't know what that meant, and he was afraid. So he sent everyone else—his wives, his children, all his potential defenders—ahead to a safe place; and he stayed, alone, to face whatever he had coming to him.

Of course Jacob couldn't sleep; there were a hundred demons haunting him. Out of nowhere a man appears, the writer of Genesis says, and this man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak. Back and forth they struggle. At some moments it seems that Jacob will win, and then there is a reversal and the other has Jacob pinned to the ground. Neither will let go; neither will give up. Jacob's hip is injured, and still he will not stop fighting. "I will not let go until you bless me," Jacob says to this stronger man. Jacob has not changed; like always, he has to win.

There have been whole treatises written on who this stranger might have been, this man that Jacob wrestled with. Was it the ghost of his brother Esau, a way for both brothers to work out their aggressions before they came together in the flesh? Was it God that Jacob was fighting? Maybe it was the two Jacobs fighting each other—the one ready to justify himself against anything Esau might say to him, and the Jacob who could ask for forgiveness.

Finally, as the night ends and the battle ends, although there is no clear winner. As the sky begins to get light, these two stand up. Both are bruised; Jacob will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. But he is also blessed; blessed with a new name that means "God has struggled with me; I have struggled with God."

The next day, Jacob and Esau meet. Jacob is startled—shocked, really—to find that his brother has come with forgiveness. Perhaps this too—his brother's surprising grace—calls out of Jacob the last bit of that wolf that had always lived in hiding before. "To see your face is like seeing the face of God," Jacob says to Esau.

Jacob is changed—transformed—by this experience. In all the stories about Jacob in the rest of Genesis, we see a different character. He is a father and a wise elder, and we see a Jacob who is filled with love and forgiveness and humility.

But here's the thing: It took that wrestling match—that fight between the two wolves inside of him—for that more graceful side of Jacob to emerge and grow. That's what God's work does sometimes, what God's presence looks like: a wrestling match, a fight for territory inside of us. We think that nearness to God is supposed to bring comfort and peace; this is the feeling we look for. But God's work in our lives is not always that. Often the plainest—and the most needed—work that God can do in us is to raise up into view the better self we have not been feeding enough, so that the two wolves inside of us can duke it out. That doesn't look like peace; it's conflict. It doesn't feel good. It is painful to see ourselves honestly; sometimes it takes a fight to let go of a way of being that has worked for us for a long time. It's much harder than saying, "This is just who I am; I'm not changing now."

God's work is not to humor us; it's to re-shape us into more beautiful, generous, loving versions of ourselves. If that feels like a battle inside of us, we ought to welcome it; and until then, we ought to be feeding the wolf we want to win. If it is a hard battle, it will be uncomfortable. It should be. We might even walk with a limp for a while afterward. But Jacob's story is our story; in the struggle itself is the blessing we have hoped for.