

**12<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost, Proper 13 – Year A – August 6, 2008 - Homily**  
**Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21**  
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The World's Strongest Man athletic competition has been held with the exception of one year since 1977. Competitors come together from all over the world at a variety of locations. This annual competition tests the strength and endurance of the men and includes such grueling tasks as truck pulling, the log throw, the crucifix, the duck walk, the yoke, the Hercules hold, and the dead lift. The descriptions alone are enough to make my back start aching.

It is said in Ecclesiastes (1:9) that there is “nothing new under the sun” and in the case of The World's Strongest Man competition, we have what we may perceive as an interesting parallel in the story of Jacob wrestling all night with a mysterious man. Let's back track a little to catch up on what's been happening with Jacob and his family. As we heard last week, Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright and the blessing due to him as the elder son. Jacob's mother, Rebekah contrived to have Jacob sent away ostensibly to find a wife, but really to preserve his life from his brother Esau. Jacob ends up with his Uncle Laban who tricks him into working seven years for the hand of Rachel, but then presents Leah to him on his wedding night. Jacob then resigns himself to working another seven years to ‘earn’ Rachel's hand as well. At the end of his fourteen years, he demands to take his wives and children, and some livestock, and head back to his homeland. His biggest fear – at least until the night of the wrestling contest – is that Esau will still want to murder him. So, we arrive at the night when Jacob sends his wives, maids, and his eleven children over the ford of the Jabbok as a kind of advance guard to show his brother Esau that he's a nice family guy now, and that it wouldn't be a good idea to kill him after all. This is the same nice guy that apparently puts his wives and children in what he thinks is harm's way ahead of himself, but that's another story!

As we see, Jacob has been working hard to preserve his life, as he anticipates a reunion with his brother, Esau. He has been doing a lot for himself we might say. And even though there is a small mention that after leaving Laban angels of God met Jacob on the way (Genesis 32:1-2) we have a lot of evidence suggesting that Jacob is really his own man, and likes to take care of himself as much as possible. A rather independent and resourceful trickster don't you think? Independent? Resourceful? How much do those two simple words describe your life and mine as well as Jacob's? As far as Jacob is concerned he has done everything in his power to appease his brother Esau and no doubt he was glad of the night alone in which to consider all his options should things turn bad the following day. God has another plan. Jacob ends up in a wrestling match with a mysterious stranger, who turns out to be another angel of God. After a long hard night the wrestling match is something of a draw, although given all the descriptions of angels throughout Scripture as magnificent, imposing beings possessing great power, I have to think that this particular angel of God was instructed to keep Jacob busy all night for some reason, rather than just teaching him a short sharp lesson in pain and humility.

At the end of the long night there is an effective stalemate until the angel strikes Jacob on the hip and puts it out of joint, then asks to be released. Even in an injured state, our strong man Jacob asks for the angel's blessing in return. That's Jacob for you, always on the make for some kind of advantage! What he most immediately gets in return is a new name: Jacob becomes Israel. The supplanter is renamed Israel, meaning “God prevails,” as indeed God always does, and frequently quite contrary to appearances. It would have been immediately apparent what the meaning was to Jacob, and so here is at least part of his evening's lesson. That Jacob has truly been a fighter is the angel's final comment, before he blesses Israel's new identity – a reinforcement of the fact that God prevails, we might ask?

There are several things that both intrigue and bother me about this story. As I just mentioned, I have a hard time imagining that the angel of God was nearly bested in a wrestling match by a man called Jacob, however strong and determined he might be. It is also something of a problem, at least to

me, that God would want to physically harm the man he has marked out to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel and the leader of God's chosen people. Is God just reminding Jacob/Israel that it is God's plan that will be fulfilled, and not our strong man's personal plots and schemes? Is God giving Jacob/Israel an extended lesson that he, and by implication you and I as well, should always wrestle out our fears with God before making our plans? Jesus certainly spends a considerable amount of time alone at night in prayer with God. So perhaps this is one of the lessons of this passage. Then there's the question of why God's blessing would come in such a violent and painful way? That doesn't sound like the God of love we are more familiar with. It doesn't accord with the kind of reconciliation, forgiveness, compassion and healing that we associate with Jesus, God's Son. Is Israel's wounding indicative of simply that nation's pain and struggle with God. Or is it likely that it is a precursor of the path that all God's children must follow -- that is the way of the cross?

Jesus is not shy about warning his followers about how much suffering they too will experience as his disciples. Is part of Jacob/Israel's painful limp from a disjointed hip a personal lesson in keeping his face turned towards God and depending on God alone? Maybe. Or maybe it is an eternal message to all who come after Israel that faithfulness does not exclude some personal cost and pain. What does your experience tell you? Think about it. In modern terms we have become used to weighing things rationally by a cost-benefit type formula. You and I have given of ourselves; we have given of our resources. We may have lost some friends because of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Have you ever looked at these things as a cost of your identity as a Christian? I'm willing to bet that even if you have dismissed it pretty quickly, because like Jacob, God's blessing in your life and mine is worth infinitely more than any pain we may have to bear. In fact, it is God's blessing in our lives that sustains us through the hardest and most painful times we will ever experience.

There is one other possibility here. It might be that Jacob did not know how much his scheming and trickery was crippling him with respect to his relationship with God. Is it possible that all the times we push God away, or don't listen to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit we too fail to notice how much it hurts our own relationship with God? Israel limps into the future with God's blessing. Israel himself does not perceive his wounding as some kind of punishment by God, nor can we -- he does after all receive God's blessing in this encounter, even though it comes with a price. As Israel says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Amen.