



Let us pray:

God of compassion, we are sick.

We have wrestled all night with worry instead of resting in you.

We have asserted our own goodness instead of awakening to yours.

We have turned away those hungry for your help instead of trusting you and feeding them from your limitless supply of blessings.

Forgive us, heal us, and help us to hold on to you.

We call upon you, for you will answer us, O God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**¹

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1-2)). Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet meet and fall in love in Shakespeare's lyrical tale of "star-cross'd" lovers. They are doomed from the start as members of two warring families. In this scene Juliet tells Romeo that a name is an artificial and meaningless convention, and that she loves the person who is called "Montague", not the Montague name and not the Montague family. Romeo, out of his passion for Juliet, rejects his family name and vows, as Juliet asks, to "deny (his) father" and instead be "new baptized" as Juliet's lover. This one short line encapsulates the central struggle and tragedy of the play.²

The man or angel who wrestled with Jacob the whole night long also asks: "What is your name?" It seems odd that the two had wrestled the whole night long with neither one knowing the name of the other, for Jacob also asks the man: "Please tell me your name."

Names identify us. Perhaps your name is a family name or has some other special significance to your family. In the south, just about the first question you are asked when introduced to someone new is "who are your people?" Where are you from and how does your family fit into the social structure of a particular area is an important identifier.

¹ Prayer of Confession. Worship Resources from Feasting on the Word (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 98.

² (<http://www.enotes.com/shakespeare-quotes/what-s-name-that-which-we-call-rose> July 30, 2014).

Friends of mine just recently got a new puppy. Last time they waited a long time before naming the puppy and this time they didn't want to do that, so they went to a baby book to seek out names. Finally, after rejecting several options, they came upon "bara-k" – seemed pretty good, especially when my friend read that the name means "blessed by God."

A couple of years ago, a friend's niece learned that she was pregnant – and not with one child but with three. Celebration at the new life that was coming to be. The doctor, however, had a cautionary word for her and her husband. He warned them that birthing triplets is a great risk. Often, he counseled them, not all survive. He suggested that they not name their unborn children as a way of protecting them, just a bit, from the possibility that one or more might not make it. He suggested they name them 1, 2 and 3 or A, B and C if they really need some specific identifier before birth.

The niece and her husband decided to follow the doctor's advice and called their unborn babies A, B, and C. Time passed and she was safely delivered. And all three lived and are thriving, praise God.

The first is named Andrew. The second is named Benjamin. And the third is named Charles. A, B, and C.

We see in several Bible stories that people's names change when they encounter God.

Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. Jacob becomes Israel – the name of the people chosen by God to give witness to God's presence in the world.

In our service of baptism, we ask that the parents or god-parents to "name this child" when it is an infant being baptized. When the person being baptized is older, he or she or the godparents name the person. It is a way of proclaiming to the world and to those gathered to celebrate the baptism of the person into the body of Christ. Names are an identifier.

In the early church, people took a new name when they were baptized. This still happens in some cultures- a name change at a time of movement from childhood into adulthood signifies the change in a person's life, status and place in community.

So, Jacob asking the name of the man with whom he had wrestled the night long is not an unusual thing. It was for him a way to mark and to remember the struggle. And the man asking Jacob for his name becomes the entry point by and through which a whole group of individuals ultimately come to be a people. Jacob becomes Israel.

We often think of Abraham as the father of Israel. And Abraham is a bedrock of our faith story. Abraham is the one God called to leave his home and travel to a new land. Abraham is the one whose descendants number as many as the grains of sand or the stars in the sky.

But Jacob is also special. Jacob has lived anything but a blameless life. He was birthed holding onto his brother Esau's ankle, and so his name – Jacob- means he who grabs. Later, Jacob dressed up to deceive his father to receive his father's deathbed blessing. Jacob took his brother Esau's birthright- demanding that Esau give up his birthright for a meal. Jacob ended up fleeing

his home because he had been deceitful and was afraid of the consequences. And now Jacob prepares to re-enter his homeland. He sends his wives, his children and goods ahead of him. Jacob hopes that his brother Esau, who is approaching with 400 men, will be mollified with the gifts of animals and other wealth that Jacob has sent ahead of their party.

Jacob is now alone – alone to wrestle with his fears and perhaps his regrets. Alone to wrestle with the shape his life will take once he re-enters his homeland and comes face-to-face with the brother he previously wronged. And he wrestles all night long with a man – and, as we learn at the end of this text, also with God. These two wrestle all the night long and it is as day breaks that the questions come: Who are you? What is your name? What is the meaning of this struggle?

Jacob is changed forever by the night. He is no longer Jacob- the past is behind him now. He has met God face-to-face and lived to tell about it. Jacob has been blessed by God. But blessings also cost. Forever after Jacob will limp because he was struck in his thigh. Jacob can never forget the night of his wrestling with God – will he, won't he- his limp is a perpetual memory that he struggled with God.

God did not leave Jacob to his own devices. God entered into Jacob's life at a time of aloneness- a time of struggle. Terence Fretheim says that Jacob's struggle with God "provides a gracious rehearsal for the actual life circumstance. To refuse to engage with God in that struggling moment denies oneself a God-given resource. To go through it with God before we go through it with others provides resources of strength and blessing for whatever lies in the wings of life."³ Jacob was blessed by God – a new name. A name that was to become the name of a whole people – Israel.

Fretheim reminds us that when it comes to struggles in daily life, we can count on God's mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, evaluating us, judging us. We may have to place our life at risk, knowing that the one who loses life will find it.

He believes that God honors the relationship both by engaging in the struggle in the first place and by persisting in that struggle through thick and thin. The most meticulous of preparations cannot guarantee a certain shaped for the future. God may break into life and force a new direction for thought and action.⁴

In your bulletins is a half page with some questions on it for you to ponder this week. Where have you wrestled with God? What was that like- what did you learn from it that has impacted your life? Where have you been blessed by God? Did you see it as a blessing at the time or did you need some distance to see and appreciate the blessing?

Earlier last week, 20 of us from St. John's joined with other churches and volunteers in delivering food to people at the park in Wingate. What struck me most as we shared the bounty with those in need was how blessed each of us are that we have the ability to purchase our own food and to make good and healthy choices about what food we eat. God has blessed me and

³ The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 994) 569.

⁴ Id, 570.

those who helped in so many ways, but having enough money to buy nutritious food is one of the ways. And God has blessed those who were able to come for the food being delivered- to share in the bounty from people's gardens and crops as well as what was contributed by markets and other vendors. God was present to both those who helped deliver the food and to those who received the food.

We are not so different than Jacob or Paul. We, too, have had times in our lives when we acted in ways inconsistent with God's steadfast love and mercy for us. We may have had times when we grasped at something we believed we needed or was due to us because we didn't trust that God would provide. We may have failed to see God's abundance because it wasn't exactly in the form we were looking for. Think about those disciples with Jesus being told: no, you give them something to eat. No, you can't send them away. Yes, you – yes, you- you are called to share what you have with those who have less.

God enters our lives when we are open to God's presence. God waits for us to call – to realize that God is divine but still desires to be intertwined in all that we do and all that we are. Our relationship with God impacts our relationships with others. If we love God with all our heart, with all our mind and with all our soul, and if we believe that God created everything that is, and that all God created is good, it impacts how we treat others.

God is not afraid of our doubts and our fears. God welcomes the chance to wrestle life's questions with us. God asks Jacob: what is your name? God asks us: what is your name? Who are you? Do you belong to me? God is waiting for us to respond, "yes, Lord, here am I. Do with me as you will." God is waiting for us at the break of day to say: "Here I am, Lord. Send me."