

“HEALING A HEEL”

Genesis 32:22-31

For more than forty years, Garrison Keillor hosted “*A Prairie Home Companion*,” a show on public radio. He combined music with stories of life in the fictional Minnesota community of Lake Wobegon. One of those stories recounts an incident when he was thirteen years old. One August morning his mother sends him and his brother and sister to the garden to pick tomatoes. While early in the season garden-ripe tomatoes would be considered a delicious treat, by August they are no more wonderful than rocks. Bored, Keillor picks a tomato and throws it at a crab apple tree. It makes a good splat. Then he throws a tomato at his brother who whips one back at him. Both duck down among the vines and heave tomatoes at one another. Their sister, who Keillor describes as “*a good person*,” warns them they are going to get into trouble if they don’t stop. She turns around, bends over and continues picking tomatoes. What a target! She is seventeen, a girl with big hips—and bending over. Keillor says she looks like the “*broad side of a barn*.” He picks up a tomato, one so big it had sat on the ground for a week. The underside is brown with small white worms living in it. It’s very juicy. With tomato in hand, Keillor stands up, takes aim—and as he is going into his windup his mother at the kitchen window calls his name in a sharp voice. He has to decide quickly what he is going to do. He decides.

Keillor acknowledges that “*A rotten Big Boy hitting the target is a memorable sound—like a fat man doing a belly flop*.” With a terrifying yell, the sister goes after her thirteen year old brother faster than anyone realized she could run. She catches him by the shirt and is about to brain him when their mother calls her name in a sharp voice. Being the good person she is, she obeys and let’s go—bursting into tears. Keillor closes this story with this explanation of his sister’s tears. “*I guess she knows that the pleasure of obedience is pretty thin compared with the pleasure of hearing a rotten tomato hit someone in the rear end*.” (Garrison Keillor, Lake Wobegon Days, 1985)

Yes, let's acknowledge, at times we find some pleasure in doing what we know is wrong. We may even benefit financially and gain respect in the eyes of worldly persons. Because it is to our advantage, we at times do what we know is evil. Such a person was the Old Testament character Jacob. In my reading I found a lot of terms to describe Jacob, none of them complimentary. They include liar, cheat, swindler, trickster, scoundrel, con artist, schemer. A colloquial term to describe Jacob would be a "*low down, good-for-nothing heel.*" The fact that he earned the reputation of being a heel might have been anticipated by the circumstances of his birth. Jacob was born as the younger twin, after his brother Esau. The scriptures indicate that when the twins were born, Jacob was hanging onto the heel of his brother, as if he was trying to pull Esau back into the womb so he could be born first. The name Jacob means "*supplanter,*" or "*one who takes the place of or edges out another.*" To be labelled a "*heel*" is a contemptible name, referring to the lowest part of the foot.

This "*heel grabber*" goes through life grabbing what belongs to others. When they were young, Jacob duped his older brother into trading his birthright for a bowl of soup when Esau returned hungry from an unsuccessful hunting trip. When their father was close to death, Jacob tricked him into giving to him the blessing which rightfully belonged to Esau. When Esau learns that he has lost his inheritance as the result of Jacob's deceptions, he is understandably angry—and vows to kill Jacob. Out of fear for his life, Jacob leaves home and goes to live with his uncle Laban. Jacob arrives at his uncle's home with nothing, but becomes a wealthy person, in part by cheating his uncle who also becomes his father-in-law. Finally, the two of them can no longer get along with one another, so Jacob prepares to leave. He decides to return to the land of his birth. His life of scheming and trickery has been good to him—at least, he has profited according to the world's standards. One problem with going home is that Jacob has to face his brother Esau from whose rage he had fled. Jacob is not sure what kind of reception to expect from his brother. Has Esau forgiven Jacob or is he still holding a grudge? Not sure what to expect, Jacob sends his whole entourage—his wives and concubines, children and herds—across the Jabbok River. Jacob stays behind alone.

Two Sundays ago we looked at the story of Jacob's dream in a deserted place of a ladder between earth and heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. That incident occurred the first night after Jacob had quickly left home and served as a reminder that God shows up in unexpected times and places, in unexpected persons and ways. The scripture we are looking at this morning occurs twenty years later. It is the last night before Jacob returns home and the anticipated meeting with his older brother. In this account we find Jacob being attacked by an individual. The Hebrew word used here suggests the attacker is a flesh-and-blood person. Different theories suggest who the intruder might be—an advance scout from Esau, maybe a desert bandit attempting to rob a straggler from the caravan, or possibly Jacob's conscience or guardian angel. The two wrestle through the entire night, seemingly evenly matched. At the end of the fitful night, Jacob is convinced he has fought with God. As Jacob prepares to meet Esau the next day, he is appropriately reflecting on his life, fully aware he has mistreated others. While in a sense, such antics have made him a wealthy man, Jacob realizes his cheating ways have alienated him from others, including his own family members.

That night in which Jacob struggles with himself, his conscience or God—whatever may be your understanding—becomes a turning point in his life. The two wrestle all night. As the light of dawn begins to break, realizing that he is not winning, the opponent lands a low-blow, hitting Jacob in the hip and throwing it out of joint. The adversary demands that Jacob let go, but Jacob refuses to do so until he receives a blessing. At the end of the match, the assailant blesses the trickster by giving him a new name. *“Your name will no longer be Jacob—denoting one who tries to edge out another. Instead, you will be called Israel because you have struggled with God.”* The patriarch emerges from the night of metaphorically wrestling with his old identity as the heel and becomes a changed person, symbolized in a new name. Unlike the old Jacob who would have sought some ways to deceive and trick Esau, this time the new Israel with a new self-understanding greets his brother with humility. They embrace and kiss one another and then weep together.

Yes, it is important that we wrestle with God because only in doing so can we receive the blessing of a changed life. We wrestle with God in a variety of ways.

- We wrestle with God ethically. Only in doing so can we come to an understanding of right and wrong according to divine truths.
- We wrestle with God's claim in our lives. Only in doing so can we grow in following Jesus faithfully.
- We wrestle with God when the circumstances of our lives cause us to have doubts or raises questions about the ways of God.

Peter De Vries for over forty years was on the staff of The New Yorker magazine. He also wrote numerous novels. Undoubtedly his most poignant novel was entitled The Blood of the Lamb, (published in 1961) written after the death of his ten year old daughter from leukemia. While fictional, this novel is also in a sense autobiographical as it follows the life of Don Wanderhope through the losses of his brother, wife and eleven year old daughter—and potentially the loss of his faith.

On his way to the hospital to visit his daughter, Carol, Wanderhope would often stop at the Church of St. Catherine where he would wrestle with God. While trying to find some peace and strength in his faith, Don would also question why God would allow an eleven year old child to suffer from a terminal illness. After weeks of up and down test results, there finally seems to be some good news. Carol's bone marrow report is almost normal. She appears to be in remission and Don is told she could go home the next day. The next day the grateful father buys a cake to celebrate with his daughter and stops at St. Catherine's to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. While there he meets one of the night nurses who is coming off duty who tells him an infection is going through the hospital ward which has seriously effected Carol. Wanderhope hurries to the hospital where one look at his daughter tells him the end is near. The germ has ravaged her bloodstream. A nurse confirms her weakened body could not fight this germ. It is just a matter of hours.

In the middle of the afternoon Carol dies. After handling some legal formalities, the grieving father stops at a bar for a drink and ends up with six or seven. He remembers the cake he had left that morning at the church when he hurriedly left after learning about the infection in the ward. He returns to the church to retrieve the cake. On the way out of St. Catherine's he notices the crucifix—a statue of Jesus nailed to the cross—over the central door. As an expression of his disappointment about life and his anger toward God, Wanderhope takes the cake out of the box, draws his arm back and lets fly with all his strength. The pastry lands squarely on Jesus' face, just beneath the crown of thorns. Then mysteriously as Wanderhope watches, he believes he sees the crucified Jesus free his hands from the nails and slowly move them toward his soiled face where he wipes the icing from his eyes and cheeks. The grieving father thinks he hears the voice of Jesus say, "*Let the little children come to me.*" No longer able to stand, Wanderhope drops to the worn steps of the church and weeps. Indeed, this grieving father has wrestled with God, and in doing so experiences a reminder of God's sacrificial love. **Yes, the value of our wrestling with God is that in doing so we experience the blessing of a changed life.**

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September 6, 2020