

August 6, 2017

*What Is Your Name?*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Genesis 32:22-31

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Since our theme for the sermons this summer is questions God and Jesus asked, I thought I'd start by asking you some questions about famous people who changed their names from the names they were born with. For example – who knows who Norma Jean Baker was? Right – Marilyn Monroe. Okay, how about Marion Morrison? John Wayne. Or how about Reginald Dwight? Elton John. Yes, entertainers and celebrities often change their names. Most of the time to something more simple than the original – Henry Deutschendorf changed his name to John Denver. Other times they change it to something more catchy – Paul Hewson changed his name Bono, and Stephanie Joanne Angelina Germanotta changed her name to Lady Gaga. Sport stars have changed their names as well. NFL wide receiver Chad Johnson changed his name to Chad Ochocinco, in honor of his jersey number – eighty five, and because it sounded cool, and NBA star Ron Artest changed his name to Metta World Peace, in honor of...well, world peace, even though he hasn't been the most peaceful player. And even some famous politicians have had different names. President Bill Clinton was William Jefferson Blythe Jr. until he changed his name at age fifteen. So names are obviously important to people. And that's exactly what we find in today's scripture.

God tells Jacob, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel." You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel. Why? Well, I'll tell you, but first let me give you a brief synopsis of Jacob's life. He and his brother, Esau, were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. And just to share a little biblical factoid, Isaac was the son of Abraham. Abraham is considered the patriarch of all three world religions that believe in the one God we worship today. Those religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All of us worshipping the same God. Can you see any irony in that? Well, we can go there at another time, but let's get back to Jacob. For whatever reason, Jacob had some serious character flaws. In fact, his name, Jacob, is a Hebrew word that means "to hinder, to obstruct, to deceive, to cheat." And this was an accurate description of Jacob. His name defined his character. He was the proverbial "black sheep" of the family. That may sound familiar to many of you because most families seems to have one, right. Throughout the years, Jacob manipulated circumstances for his own selfish purposes, causing all kinds of trouble and problems in the family. His ultimate offense was tricking his blind and dying father Isaac into giving him the family inheritance which rightfully belonged to his older brother, Esau. Of course, this caused even more havoc, and Jacob ended up fleeing the country because Esau was going to kill

him. Then, in his new land, he got married, twice...sound familiar, had all sorts of in-law problems...sound familiar, and in general his life was in turmoil...sound familiar? And eventually, he knew he had to get out of there as well. And so now, Jacob the deceiver, the cheater, is on the run again. And, like many people who are in trouble, he is drawn back home. So he sets out, but learns that Esau has heard he returning and is coming out to meet him with four hundred men. And Jacob knows that Esau could be coming to kill him for all that he has done in the past.

So there he is, reflecting on his life – a string of broken relationships, no place to call home, an uncertain future, and now he faces possible death. And as night falls and darkness begins to close in around him, he is alone with his thoughts, fears, anxieties and guilt. And suddenly he begins to wrestle with a “man,” whom he soon realizes is God. And I’m certain we all know that struggle. For aren’t there times in the middle of the night when we feel frightened and alone, facing a difficult situation, the past catching up with us, our future uncertain. Something happens that affects our relationships, our living situation, our health, our jobs. Pressure and responsibilities overwhelm us, and we feel helpless and no longer in control. And yes, for a while we might be able to put up a good front, stay strong, but inevitably there comes that time, when in the dark night, we, too, toss and turn and wrestle. We wrestle with the choices we made and how they have adversely affected us and our family. We wrestle with the choices others have made that hurt us. We wrestle with a body or mind that is betraying us with disease and affliction. And we find that ultimately... we are wrestling with God. In anger, fear, frustration, confusion, we blame God, accuse God, question God. We wrestle with God over unresolved issues, unanswered prayers, unexpected changes. We wrestle with God for control over our lives. But as Professor Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Have you ever noticed how we talk about surrender? Someone says, ‘How are you?’ and you decide to tell the truth. ‘I’m crazed’ you say, ‘my life is a mess. I’ve lost control over this or that.’ Then, if the person is a true friend, he or she smiles at you and tells you straight up, – ‘You don’t hate losing control...you hate losing the illusion that you were ever in control.’”

You see, in this life, we never really have control. There are too many outside forces, other people, and unexpected situations that impact our lives in ways we cannot plan or change. There will be times in all of our lives when we come to that place where there is nothing more we can do – we can’t control every one of our health issues, we can’t control other people, and we definitely can’t control the future. And that was Jacob's situation as well. Here he is, struggling and wrestling with God, when suddenly, God

reaches out and touches Jacob, and he is wounded. And from that time on, Jacob would walk with a limp. But it is at that point, when there is nothing more he can do, that Jacob finally admits that, rather than struggle with God - he needs to embrace God. In that struggle during that long, dark night, he has realized that he is not in control, and, if he is to have any hope, he must surrender to God's will. And so, broken and humbled, he holds on to God, and says to God, "I will not let you go. I will not let you go, until you bless me." And isn't this ultimately what our struggle is all about? Wanting God to help us, bless us? Yes, in our wrestling with God, at some point, we realize the only thing left to do is to admit that we need help. We need God. We need God's strength, God's wisdom, God's comfort, God's presence. We need to embrace God in our lives. Having the assurance that no matter what our circumstance, no matter what we've done, God really does love us. That God cares about us and will be with us in our sorrow, our brokenness, our pain, our uncertainty.

And let me assure you that God does love you, God does care about you, and God does indeed want to bless you. But that can only happen when we freely surrender ourselves and our lives, to God. When we give up who we are, in order to become the person God wants us to be. And this was the turning point for Jacob. Because before God actually blesses Jacob, God asks him a simple question, "What is your name?" Now what kind of question is that, you might wonder – does God not know Jacob? Of course he does. But before Jacob can genuinely surrender to God's will, he needs to give up his old self and all that represents. What is your name? You see, he first needs to admit to himself and to God, "I am Jacob – the deceiver, the cheater, the trickster." And when he does that, he has a revelation. He doesn't want to be that person any more. He wants to change. And God gives him a new name – Israel – meaning, "may God prevail." Because you see, God did prevail and Jacob was changed. He was transformed into a new being, and given a new lease on life. He goes out, a changed person, to meet Esau. And instead of hate and revenge, there is only love and brotherhood, and a new beginning. Then, as Israel, he goes on to become the father of all the tribes of the Israelites. Yes, God prevailed, and in turn, Jacob prevailed and was blessed.

So let's think about that question God asked Jacob again. "What is your name?" And consider – what does your name represent to others – to your family, your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors? When they hear your name, what do they think? Do they think, perhaps, of someone who is impatient, stubborn, prideful, materialistic, judgmental, a complainer, a gossip, lazy, manipulative, unfriendly? Well, whatever the description, God wants to hear you say it, so that you can give up who you are, and

be transformed into a new person. No longer do you have to be defined by that name, no longer do you have to be defined by your past, or who you were. God is ready to give you a new name, a new identity, a new future. You too can be Israel – the one who struggled and yet prevailed. The one who goes through those times of wrestling, who finally surrenders, and who holds on to the God that holds on to you and loves you. And then you will be the one who is blessed. You will know that “peace that passes all understanding” the bible talks about. You will know that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who hold on to God.” You will hear God telling you, "Be strong and courageous for I will never leave you or forsake you." You will know that God “has a plan for you to give you a future with hope.” And, you will know what the living God, Jesus Christ means when he says, “The truth will set you free.” For when we face the truth about ourselves, we are set free from who we are in order to become the person who God wants us to be.

And, yes, we may come away limping. But it is only a reminder that we have been given a new identity, a new opportunity, a second chance, a new life. And so, hold on to him. Because God has something wonderful in store for you as well. Amen.