

The Rev. Adam Pierce
Genesis 32: 22-31
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St. Paul's Episcopal

What's in a name?

I was named Adam because I was the first grandson born on my mother's side of the family. Of course this name didn't really mean anything besides that; just a signifier without any perks. In college, I was taught another meaning for my name by my Judaism professor and now good friend; dirt man or man of dirt. If I ever imagine myself to be high and mighty, I just have to be reminded that my name is dirt.

Ok so I like my name it's fine enough but it doesn't really mean anything to me. Now say Adam Miller Pierce, and suddenly there is more of a story there. Adam, we've been through already, Miller is my mother's maiden name and of course Pierce is the family name. Our names remind us who and whose we are and to whom we belong. That's why every child knows they're out of line when they hear their mother yell their full name. It's a reminder of who we are. Or at the very least, who holds sway in our lives.

In my last sermon I spoke about the name of Jacob. That because he was born clutching on to his brother's heel he was given this name; which means to strive or take or over reach. Throughout Jacob's story we see him again and again taking what is not his in accordance with tradition anyway.

But Jacob's story is more than just about someone who is over reaching. In fact it might not be about that at all. And his story isn't his alone; it's ours too. But His struggle, his taking from is always done in a manner that stubbornly insists that he matters. He's not just Jacob the second born son of Isaac and Rebekah younger brother to Esau. That was not good enough for Jacob. Jacob, who knew his father favored Esau and whose brother knew he is favored by their father is always concerned with proving his worth; demanding that he matters.

Today Jacob gets a new name. Today we meet Jacob on his return home from his father in law Laban whom he'd been with for 20 years. He hasn't seen his brother Esau for 20 years. Jacob is afraid of this encounter fearing that Esau is still angry with Jacob for taking his birthright. Jacob is afraid Esau will kill him and his entire family, even after all these years. Jacob sends them away and spends the night alone in the wilderness. That should be a clue, that's our signal that something life changing is about to happen; it usually does in the wilderness. We're not told who, but someone, a man, wrestles with Jacob until daybreak. The entire night they struggle, locked in arms with one another.

If you've ever seen wrestling, and I'm not necessarily talking about professional wrestling, but collegiate or high school wrestling. These folks are locked in with one another; wrestling is an intimate act, you can't wrestle someone you don't have your arms or legs wrapped around. Wrestling entails a connectedness. If we are to imagine this being wrestling with Jacob as God,

then we can take from this encounter that that relationship, that relationship between us and God is one of wrestling, of struggling. It's intimate, but it's physical, it's demanding, and it's risky.

They wrestle all night and just before daybreak the man asks Jacob to let go. And Jacob's response? I will not let go. If we've met Jacob before we should not be surprised by this; of course he won't let go, he's never let anything go, he came into this world holding on and he continued to never let it go. Even after the guy gets his hip knocked out of the socket he still holds on.

I will not let go, says Jacob. I will not let go
Unless you bless me.

And Jacob gets his blessing. But the blessing is not relief from his pain or promises of vast territory or possessions. The blessing is a new name, a name that acknowledges who Jacob actually is: Israel: You have striven with God and prevailed. That is it, that's the blessing, an acknowledgment of who Jacob actually is; Jacob is the blessing, that struggle is the blessing, not a release from it.

Throughout it all Jacob stubbornly insists that he matters, he just won't let it go. This is the mark of his faithfulness; not because he admits his mistakes before God and does all the right things; he refuses to let go of his blessedness; the belief that he matters; that is what makes him faithful

So what's in a name? Jacob's name is our name, Israel is our name. We can get confused and think Jesus started a brand new religion, but Jesus understood himself to be a Jew, an ancestor of Jacob; We belong there too; Jacob's story is our story.

To be in this faith means to be those who wrestle with God, those who struggle. Our struggle is not separate from our connectedness to God. It is central to it. That desire for justice central to our faith and found in our baptismal vows is a symbol that we are connected to God. Those in the streets insisting that Black Lives Matter day in and day out, that stubborn insistence is part of the Church's charge in this world. In our stubbornness, in our insistence in justice against all odds; our identity is formed there and strengthened here together around this table.

To be the Church is to be in that struggle together with God. Conflict is a part of the deal. If you're looking for a faith that guarantees an easy life, makes you comfortable, offers immediate gratification, then you've come to the wrong place. We are blessed, as Jacob, in our struggle.

We are less than 100 days to Election Day. Members of this church are Republicans, Democrats, independents, and anything in between. We're going to be true to ourselves and remain stubborn in our insistence that we belong to this community. Yet we'll also carry on insisting that we hold on to each other: You think that won't be a struggle? We belong, you belong; this isn't easy work, but it's who we are. We are here to wrestle with God, with each other. We are here to wrestle with the things of this world as they are in light of what we know of God's justice. In this struggle and striving we will learn too who we truly are; and we will come to know the name Israel, as our own. *Amen.*