

Finding Blessing Amidst the Struggle

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
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In the last 2.5 months I've seen two of the best movies ever. One is Of Gods and Men, a French film which we'll be showing here in October. The other is The Tree of Life by the director Terrence Malik who once taught philosophy at MIT. As for those who saw Tree of Life, they either hated it or loved it. I, of course, am a proud member of the latter group. But both of these independent movies are superb at exploring the depths of our faith and the depths of who we are as human beings. And what that means is that these movies wrestle and struggle. The best ones always do.

Going back to the Tree of Life for a moment, the movie's narrative focuses on the O'Brien family of Waco, Texas in the 1950's. But this specific family in that specific time and space comes to represent the entire cosmos. Both in the family and in the cosmos there is beauty so bright it hurts. Both in the family and in the cosmos there is struggle so fierce the inhabitants are left scarred. And yet, within such a family and such a cosmos, the director tells us there are but two ways to live: the way of nature and the way of grace. The way of nature is a way by which there can be much gain, but little happiness. The way of grace is a way by which there is much joy even, and maybe especially, when there is much sorrow.

The same is true of the Harry Potter saga and if you're wondering why Harry is so popular, in short, in his struggle we see our own. We see a reflection of our struggle with suffering, with inequities, with finality, with meaning, with death. And Voldemort and nature show us one way we can respond. Harry and grace show us the other. But let us not forget that the way of grace is a costly grace. After all, even Harry has a scar; an everpresent reminder of the day his parents died. And yet, even on that day, even on the day of his scarring, Harry was blessed. Amidst the joys and sorrows of our lives; amidst all of our struggles, and despite the presence of our limps and scars, we too can still find a blessing. Indeed, we can still demand a blessing.

So for one last time this summer, let's return to our friend Jacob. If you remember back a few weeks ago, Jacob was running away in the middle of the night after manipulating his brother Esau one too many times. The problem is that Jacob fled to his Uncle Laban's home, and Laban was as big of a manipulator and deceiver as was Jacob. It's actually amazing the two of them made it twenty years without killing each other. But Jacob grew weary of his uncle's manipulations and with nowhere else to go, he heads home.

There's one problem though; Jacob doesn't know what to expect from his brother. Maybe two decades have softened his heart. Then again, two decades is a long time to nurse a grudge. Then word comes to Jacob that Esau and 400 men are on their way to meet him. Jacob is stuck. He can't go back. After all, too many bridges have been burnt with Laban. But on the other side 400 men await. So Jacob tries to manage his situation and his anxiety. He starts by sending over his property and livestock as gifts to Esau. Perhaps fearing that that was not enough, Jacob sends over his two wives, two maids and eleven children. At least one scholar has suggested that Jacob sent everyone else across the river first so that if he heard screaming from the other side, he would know Esau hadn't forgiven him. Whatever his thinking, we know Jacob is scared, out of control, and at least for that night, he is utterly alone. Or not. Sometimes when we are the most alone, we find out just how much baggage we brought on the trip.

As you know by now, Jacob did not have a peaceful night's sleep that night. There's been a lot of ink spilled as to who Jacob wrestled with that night. The Hebrew does NOT tell us that Jacob wrestled with an angel. Rather, it says very specifically that he wrestled with an *ish* or a

man. However, the man himself says that Jacob wrestled with God and humans, and, more importantly perhaps, Jacob himself says that in the process he saw God's very face.

So who did Jacob wrestle with? Does it really matter? Did Jacob wrestle with himself? Undoubtedly. Was the man he wrestled with Isaac or Esau or Laban? Um... yes. Did Jacob wrestle with the divine? Absolutely. But as Jacob wrestled with himself, his conscious, his unconscious, his past, his present, his future, his father, his brother, his uncle AND his God, Jacob starts to realize that this is one fight he can't win, As if there is any other outcome for Jacob; as if there is any other outcome for us. But Jacob hates losing, and so, conceding that he can't win this one, he changes strategy: he refuses to lose. And so as the light of daybreak threatens to end his night of unconscious and conscious wrestling, Jacob simply holds on. He refuses to let go, at least not without gaining a blessing first and that is exactly what he got.

Now last night when he went to bed, he was Jacob the heel, Jacob the manipulator, the deceiver, for that is exactly what Jacob means. But when he awoke he did so with a new identity. Now he was Israel, which means "the one who struggles with God." Oh. And he had a new limp. Blessings come true, you see. They're just not free.

How about you? Have you ever had one of those nights when it seemed that you wrestled with everything that has been and everything you fear may be? Of course you have, as have I. These last few years have been... tiresome with two suicides, two surgeries, a job and geographical change and the frustrating reality that we can't sell our former home. And yet in all of this, my story is strikingly... common. Others have lost loved ones by suicide; others struggle with family dysfunction, others wrestle with health issues and diseases they can't pronounce; others have work related issues and dramas; and the good Lord knows I am not the only person wrestling with real estate issues. No, this is part of the human condition. We struggle. We struggle with messes of our own creation; we struggle with messes others have created and we struggle with messes that just are.

It's interesting to me... Moses obeyed and went up the holy mountain. Moses obeyed and was amidst the cloud for 40 days. Moses obeyed received the tablets and then went back and got others when the first ones were broken. BUT Moses never saw the face of God. In fact, he saw but God's backside. And yet, Jacob struggled and he struggled with everything and everybody. And scripture tells us that He saw the face of God. I am convinced that what distinguishes us in this life, what distinguishes Harry from Voldemort, what distinguishes Jacob from Laban, what distinguishes Jesus from much of the rest of humanity is the willingness to struggle and to find and create blessings amidst the struggles and sorrows of life. What distinguishes Christ as well as mythical Christ-like figures like Harry are precisely their willingness to embrace their scars and their limps.

So do you have scars? How about a limp? Some of the kids at the camp commented about my leg scars. Ooooh, what happened to you?!? And yet, dare I say it, I had a bit of pride about my scar. Yeah, I do have scars and they are reminders of all I have lived through, both the quotidian as well as the unusual. My scars, both those you can see and those you cannot, are now part of my journey, my struggle, my identity, my story. They hurt like hell at the time, and sometimes they still act up. But now, my scars, my journey, my struggles, my story are just that; mine.

As for those struggles and that story of mine, I raise them to your awareness only inasmuch as I'd like to convince you of the worth of struggling. I believe if it's worth having, its worth struggling for. I believe in struggling as a parent. I believe in struggling as a spouse. I believe in struggling with my faith and my God. There are no magic wands, no easy blessings out there to be had. And so I will keep questioning and wrestling and doubting and struggling because the truth is it is amidst the questioning and wrestling and doubting and struggling that I have found blessings.

Benedictine nun and writer Joan Chittister has written about a "spirituality of struggle" and about its patron saint Jacob/Israel. In his story she identifies what all of us struggle with — change, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and yes, scarring. But she also says that with every human struggle, there is a corresponding divine gift; gifts like courage and conversion and endurance and transformation. Sister Joan believes Jacob does what all of us must do, or at least what we must do if we want to live: "He confronts in himself the things that are wounding him, admits his limitations, accepts his situation, rejoins the world, and moves on."

Jacob demands a blessing from his struggles and moves on. The next morning He crosses the river. And so it is with us, or so it could be with us. No, you're right; this is not the movies. There are not always happy endings. There absolutely are no magic wands. Scripts are not clean cut, and yes, we will struggle in the night. But I think... I think that's okay. Apparently this is the most common means by which God blesses us. Amen.