You Can Do This Hard Thing

Genesis 32:22-31

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Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Think with me for a moment about the hardest thing you’ve ever had to go through in your life. Maybe it was, or is, a medical issue, or a mental health issue. Maybe it was, or is, abuse, or being a victim of another kind of crime. Maybe it was, or is, the breakup of a marriage or the death of a loved one, financial hardship or the loss of a job. Maybe it has to do with school, or work. Maybe it was, or is, a natural or human-caused disaster, a battle in a war, time in jail or needing to flee for your life. Maybe it was, or is, coming out as gay or claiming your gender identity, or dealing with racism or sexism. Maybe it was, or is, estrangement from a parent or child, or, like Jacob, from a sibling. Take a moment and reflect on one of the hardest things you’ve ever had to face in your life. (Silence)

Now if that hard thing is in the past, consider for a moment how you got through it. If that hard thing is in the present, how are you getting through it? (Silence)

One of the aspects of the Bible I love the most is that the stories it tells include lots of people going through lots of kinds of hard times. It does not present a false picture of life, where a relationship with God or Jesus means you have no more difficult issues in your life and it’s all smooth sailing. That would be depressing, because we all would think we must have too little faith or that God hates us, like Job’s friends thought must be the case in that story. No, the Bible tells life whole, with struggles as well as joys, failures as well as successes. As Jacob lived it, the Bible is full of blessings, which doesn’t mean full of ease, for Jacob’s blessing came only after wrestling with other people, with himself, and with God. The blessing was a certainty that even when he struggled, with people, himself, or God, God’s face was not turned away from him. He named the place he slept the night before facing Esau, whom he thought would probably kill him, “God’s face,” to be reminded that God was beside him in the struggle. Not, please note, that God would take away all struggles. The name of the place is not “God will make everything all right all the time,” but “God’s face.” Unlike his struggles of the past, Jacob knew that this struggle in meeting Esau could be different because Jacob had a new confidence that he could do this hard thing. He had struggled with God and found a blessing in the struggle. Success was not guaranteed, but he believed he could walk forward instead of running away.

The author Madeleine L’Engle is quoted in our book group book as writing “Perhaps we need an angel to start grappling with us, to turn us aside from the questions which have easy answers to those which cause us to grow, no matter how painful that growth can be.” Jacob faced the truth that he had caused a great deal of pain in his brother’s life, from the moment of their birth. Esau was certainly justified in hating him. Jacob’s first temptation was simply to send bribes and run away. But he took courage from grappling with his angel, or God, or whoever that was, and walked to meet his brother. In this case, he was received with love. He might not have been. The angel/God/whoever gave Jacob no guarantees. Only the promise of presence.

God’s presence in our lives is not always easy. That’s a mistake a lot of us make at one time or another in our faith lives. We think that God is with us to smooth out the rough places, not to lead us into them. And yet all through the Bible, God leads people into tough places where they don’t want to go. Moses back to Egypt. Esther into the presence of the King. Mary into pregnancy before marriage. Knocking Saul right off his horse to show him Jesus and make him Paul. The life of faith regularly takes us into difficult territory, challenging situations, questions we would rather ignore. And if the source of the challenge is not God, then it could be choices that we and/or other people make leading us into challenging places, tough times we’d rather avoid. Places we set up a stone and name “God’s face.”

One of the most misquoted or misunderstood pieces of scripture comes when Paul writes to the Romans “We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God.” He does NOT say that everything that happens to us will be good if we love God. He says that God is able to take whatever happens and bring good from it. That’s different. It may not be the good we think we want. It may not be the good that means all troubles disappear. Indeed, it may be good for someone else but not for us, in our understanding of the word “good.” But good comes. For those who have been given courage and confidence, despite fear, knowing the presence of God, to move into the hard times, places, situations, questions in life, as individuals, families, communities, and churches.

The singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer has a song whose title I borrowed for the title of this sermon: You Can Do This Hard Thing. The last verse goes like this:

Here we stand breathless and pressed in hard times.  
Hearts hung like laundry on backyard clothes lines.  
Impossible just takes a little more time.  
From the muddy ground comes a green volunteer.  
In a place we thought barren, new life appears.  
Morning will come whistling some comforting tune, for you.  
You can do this hard thing. You can do this hard thing.  
It’s not easy I know, but I believe that it’s so,

you can do this hard thing.

The world is full of blessings. Sometimes you have to wrestle to receive them. But you can do this hard thing. God is with you. Amen.