
Living with a Limp

Genesis 32:22-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 6, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

“The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.” The sun rose and we saw Jacob in the daylight for who he really was; he was living with a limp. Jacob wrestled with a mysterious man until daybreak and during that wrestling match the man struck Jacob on his hip socket, putting his hip out of joint and giving a new meaning to the term “hip hop.” Jacob hip hopped, limped along in life. Yet the sun still rose.

There are so many people in the Bible or throughout history who have limped in the sun. Not that all of them had an actual limp but they had an issue, an ailment, a pain, a struggle, a so-called limitation or disability, yet the sun still rose upon them. Jacob is an example. Saul is an example; he was king but suffered from depression and bouts of insanity. Moses was a stutterer, slow of speech and heavy of tongue, and hesitated when God called him to liberate the children of Israel but he led them out of Egypt eventually. Abraham Lincoln was known to suffer from depression yet is deemed one of the greatest Presidents ever in this country. Franklin Delano Roosevelt suffered from polio and could not stand or walk without crutches yet was elected four times as President of the United States, from 1932 to 1944, and guided this country through the “great depression” and World War II. Wilma Rudolph was also afflicted with polio as a child but went on to become an accomplished sprinter and the first American woman, and African-American woman, to win three gold medals in one Olympic Games. The sun rose even while some limped.

Marlee Matlin, who’s been deaf since she was 18 months old, was the youngest person to win the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role, which she did for *Children of a Lesser God*. Actor James Earl Jones, the voice of Darth Vader and CNN, overcame a stutter for which he was so embarrassed that he refused to speak in school but is now beloved for his distinctive voice—“This is CNN.” Jim Abbot was born with no right hand but he still played quarterback in college, participated in the Olympics, and became a major league pitcher, throwing a no-hitter at Yankee Stadium. Mystery novelist Agatha Christie had a learning disability called dysgraphia, which prevented her writing from being legible or easily understood; she had to dictate all 100-plus of her novels, stories and plays, and became a best-selling book writer. Writer Hans Christian Andersen, inventor Alexander Graham Bell, and musician Cher are among the millions who have dyslexia, a kind of limp that could make life seem out of joint. Yet the sun still rose.

There are so many who are limping in the sun, limping through life, including some of you. Life’s not neat or clean or polished or pristine or painless or struggle-free for you. There are wrestling matches that have left you wounded and limping along in life. Yet, there are strands of Christianity that are very popular which promote only a positive, pain free image of following Christ and don’t appear to leave room for limps. Rather, they hold up implicit metaphorical signs to the masses on TV or the Internet that read—“No limping allowed.” No struggle, no questioning, no wrestling, no suffering, no brokenness, no shortcomings, no imperfections, no Jacob style “hip hop.” “Only six pack, muscular, triumphant, dominant, prosperous, rich Christianity welcomed here.” Jacob wouldn’t buy this and neither would God.

Jacob comes from a dysfunctional family with family hostilities; this is no biblical Walton or “Little House on the Prairie” family. His parents, Isaac and Rebekah, played favorites, making he and his fraternal twin Esau grow up hating each other. Jacob also swindled Esau out of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Then, he and Rebekah lied and swindled the family blessing from his blind, dying father. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran. Eventually, he fled Laban, only to encounter his brother Esau. Between Laban and encountering Esau again, Jacob meets his match at night when he’s all alone.

You have to encounter your real self when you are by yourself and the door to God is sometimes only opened in solitude when we are left to battle in the dark. Jacob’s life is one long struggle with his family and God. His own name is a dead giveaway. Jacob means “deceiver” or “trickster” or “supplanter” and when his name is changed to ‘Israel’ through the wrestling bout, that name means “struggler with God” or “God struggles.” This fight at night reveals how struggle is a part of the life of faith. The name ‘Israel’ could mean that Jacob wrestled with God and that God wrestled with Jacob. God struggles. God in human form as this mysterious man in the night shows his vulnerability in human flesh. But it’s only Jacob who is wounded when he’s struck in the hip. His struggle with God creates a limp in his life and all can see it in the sun at daybreak.

There’s no shame in struggling throughout life and the Christian journey. We all live with limps if we’ve ever met God. You never come away the same after meeting God, remaining. You will be changed but you won’t be perfect. Your limp, your imperfection, is not a sign that you don’t know God; it could be the very sign that you have wrestled and struggled with God so deeply and faithfully, creating a more vulnerable you. Limping in the sun openly is an act of faith and courage because by doing so we show that we aren’t super Christians but real, genuine ones and it’s okay to be that way. Life may be out of joint a bit and we may hip hop along but the limp keeps us honest with ourselves, others, and God. The limp is not a liability but shows that we’ve been with God in the dark and God is in the struggle whatever it might be because this is part of the spiritual life. If there is no struggle, no wrestling, there may be no blessing either.

The limp will go wherever you go. The suffering will follow. The memories of the past will continue. Limps become a part of our life forever. Just as the wounds of the crucifixion are not erased by the resurrection, our limps don’t disappear when blessings come. Actually, the blessing of God has its genesis in the struggle and the truth is that although Jacob is changed to a new person ‘Israel’ he emerges from his encounter with God, limping because of his hip. This reveals that the life of faith can sometimes hurt; it’s not always easy, and we can come away from God wounded. As Walter Brueggemann says of Jacob’s situation: his meeting God “did not lead, as we are wont to imagine, to reconciliation, forgiveness, healing. It resulted in a crippling.” Our limps may be the mark of God on our lives.

Limping in the sun may be the sign that we are actually changed. But I will also say, it could be a sign that we are blessed and that there is a blessing from God in the struggle. Even after Jacob is struck in the hip he doesn’t let the man go until he’s blessed by God. After his name change, he’s blessed but remember, he still limps. The limping is not the negation of the blessing or a signal of the absence of one; in this case, it is the indication that one is indeed blessed in the presence of God. Jacob sees God face to face and survives. He’s blessed yet he still limps. The limping doesn’t show a lack of faith or trust but that he limps onward and forward reveals how much he trusts God. We are blessed despite our limping and our limping may actually be the blessing. A limp shows you can see

the face of God, be blessed, and still have struggles and suffer. Just because you've been in presence of God doesn't mean all of your pain disappears. You might live with a limp but there won't be the blessing without the wound because you can't have the gospel without the cross. You can't have the resurrection without the crucifixion. So you may be limping, but there's also a blessing in the struggle and there's no shame in that. Just as the sun rose upon Jacob even while he was limping, the sun still rises upon you and your limp.

There's an Australian-born man named Nick Vujicic who was born without limbs, without arms or legs. He has an extremely rare congenital disorder known as tetra-amelia syndrome. When he was born, the doctors said that he would be a vegetable. He was the first disabled person integrated into the Australian school system. He wrestled with depression and was bullied at school. When he was 10 years old, he attempted suicide. But his Dad always told him that he was "a gift, just differently packaged." And this is so true. This 30-something man has a small foot on his left hip, which he refers to as his little chicken drumstick; it helps him balance. Nick can type, pick things up between his toes and even kick a ball. He swims regularly and has gone skydiving. He's a husband and a father. He runs a non-profit Christian ministry called, *Life Without Limbs*, as well as the organization *Attitude is Altitude*, which markets his motivational speeches and campaigns against bullying. He speaks to thousands to encourage people to not give up. As he says, "We sometimes wait for a miracle to happen in life — but the miracle never comes. I wish many things were different in my life. But knowing I can be a miracle for someone else makes my life worth living." He says things like he may not be able to hold his wife's hands but he doesn't need hands to hold his wife's heart. His first principle for living is "be thankful." His attitude gives him altitude even though he has no legs.

The sun still rises, with or without limbs. The sun still rises even in Jesus Christ, the everlasting Son of God, who is a suffering servant and a triumphant King. He limped for the love of the world all the way to the cross that we might receive the blessing of salvation through the resurrection. His body was limp on the cross but his cruciform scars are an insignia of an eternal victory. Jesus wrestled with death, hell and the grave and came out with a blessing for us all. Death couldn't hold him, the grave couldn't keep him, hell became hallelujah when it encountered him, and the sun rose early on Easter morning to let us know that the sun/son still rises!

You may be limping but your limp will not outlast the blessed love of God.

Like Charles Wesley writes in his hymn, "Come O Thou Traveler Unknown" (pp. 386-387) which was originally called "Wrestling Jacob."

*Come, O thou Traveller unknown,
whom still I hold, but cannot see;
my company before is gone,
and I am left alone with thee;
with thee all night I mean to stay,
and wrestle till the break of day.*

*In vain thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold.
Art thou the man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold:*

*wrestling, I will not let thee go,
till I thy name, thy nature know.*

*'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear thy whisper in my heart!
The morning breaks, the shadows flee;
pure universal Love thou art:
to me, to all, thy mercies move;
thy nature and thy name is Love.*

The sun still rises. Keep hip hopping along until the love of Christ meets you in the dark again or today at this table. Amen.