

Walking With a Limp
Aug. 3, 2014
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Text: Genesis 32:7-13, 21-31

Once again I step to the pulpit with the pain of the world on my mind and its weight on my shoulders. I am not alone, I'm sure. We are so keenly aware of the strife between peoples and nations around the globe. Even the stock market showed its fatigue with the world's troubles, the Dow Jones dropping hundreds of points Thursday and Friday.

In the Middle East, some are now calling it a "war" between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, a war that needlessly wastes dozens of civilian lives almost every day. The enmity and distrust between those peoples seems so deeply rooted that peace between them seems virtually impossible, to say nothing of Ukraine and all the other hot spots around the world.

Yet it is fundamentally human to yearn for peace, and peace almost always requires some form of reconciliation. Reconciliation means "to bring together again." It's that word "together" that is so often the hard part. Two nations, two peoples that cannot remember the last time they were truly together, truly as one, may have an especially hard time seeing to the other side of reconciliation, to a time when peoples are "together again."

Here in America, that must be said about race, more specifically about whites and African-Americans. Yes, we have made great progress and there is great good news in some aspects of racial relations. Some even say we are living in a post-racial era, or at least that the Millennial Generation, the generation born since 1985, represents our chance at a post-racial America.

Not so fast, others say, not so fast. We still have *much* work to do, hard work, the work of reconciliation, before we can say we live in a post-racial society, before we can claim real peace. The harsh truth of our nation's embrace of slavery for its first 250 years is that we were never really together, at least on equal terms, in those years. And, many would add, we are still not on equal terms. Just look at education, employment, housing, incarceration and economic measures. It's hard to find many "equal signs" in all of that data.

So we are left with the work of reconciliation, the act of telling it like it is. As people of faith, we are called to root that work in our faith, as we are doing at Caldwell through the initiative called Discipleship of Race and Class. Next Sunday we have the extraordinary chance to share the journey of De and Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick. They are peeling back the layers of truth that come with the discovery that De's great-great grandfather owned Jimmie Lee's great-great grandfather. What must it be like for them to look into each other's eyes and each other's souls and take in that word "owned," as if we were talking about a piece of furniture? But, of course, we aren't.

Today, I suggest we prepare ourselves, in a way, for the experience next Sunday, but also for the remaining work each of us must do in dealing with race. I say it that way because I do not accept the notion that we are ever finished with that work ... and never will be in our lifetimes, or in the life of our nation. We fool ourselves if any of us, regardless of skin color, ever declares that we have it all figured out. Race and identity – ours and our nation's – are that deep. So it is for our church family, as well.

I've always been drawn to the story of the brothers Jacob and Esau. Not unlike the story of America and African-Americans, unspeakable harm was done by one to the other. It's a story that involves deception and theft, scheming and distrust, fear and suspicion ... but also, in the end, reconciliation. The reconciled because both men walked with God, "feared" God in the Old Testament sense of that word "fear." It's a story that reminds us of that old axiom of faith that "with God anything is possible." Because, otherwise, one would think reconciliation would have been impossible.

You remember the earlier chapters as told in Genesis. The great patriarch Abraham, chosen by God to give birth to a "great nation," passes that mantle to his son Isaac. In turn, Isaac has two sons, Abraham and Esau. As the oldest son, Esau was due his father's blessing, which meant everything in those days. But Jacob tricked his father into blessing him instead, depriving Esau of his very identity. Jacob fled for his life to another land, where he continued to gain through deceiving others. No wonder that the name Jacob translates to "trickster" and "deceiver."

The years that followed brought wealth and great success to both men as measured in flocks and land and wives and children. Then came the day that Jacob felt called to return to his homeland ... and to seek the forgiveness and reconciliation of his brother, Esau.

That is where we find the story with today's scripture reading. Genesis 32:7 picks up on Jacob's understandable anxiety about the encounter. It says, "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed." Let's admit it - that's often the way it is any time we try to have an

authentic conversation about race, at least a conversation that involves people of different races. Right? Jacob couldn't really know what was in Esau's heart and mind. But after what Jacob had done to Esau, Jacob could imagine what Esau might think and feel toward his estranged brother, the deceiver.

In the same way, we cannot know what is in the hearts of our brothers and sisters of a different race. Whites for African-Americans. African-Americans for whites, and so on. The sins of stereotyping and assumption try hard to cloud and misguide our thinking and our feeling. Even our own anxiety and fear about what we think jump up in our heads and we transfer those feelings onto the other person. Jacob knew he was afraid of what might happen with Esau. He recognized it within himself.

So, too, we should recognize and confess that talking – really talking - about race stirs all kinds of emotions within us, fear and anxiety, among them. Perhaps recognizing and naming these emotions might help us prepare for a conversation that is not at all comfortable or predictable.

What did Jacob do next? He hit his knees. He went to his God in prayer and he confessed all he was and all he felt to the One who already knew him best. He prayed for deliverance, whatever God would deem that to mean. Scripture doesn't say he sweat blood while praying, as Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane, praying for his deliverance from the cross. But Jacob did some serious praying.

In our own thinking about racial reconciliation in America, we might be well advised to hit our knees, too. To confess our anxiety to God. To recognize that God is the source of all of our abundance and that God walks with those who sincerely call on God's name. And to ask God that, according to God's will, our country might be delivered to a new future together, that we might be delivered to that future.

Then Jacob wanted to demonstrate his good will, to show Esau that he entered into the act of reconciliation as a man of peace and new-found humility. So he offered quite a generous a present in advance of their meeting.

Acknowledgment of fear and anxiety. Prayer that is honest and self-aware. Demonstration of good will. All of that was important to Jacob and Esau's coming together again. But it was all prelude to the main thing that Jacob had to endure. On the night before he was to meet Esau, Jacob was left alone to his thoughts and prayers. Then a messenger – maybe an angel, maybe some other kind of divine agent – came to Jacob. Throughout the night they wrestled. The messenger was strong but Jacob was just as strong. As morning dawned, it ended in a draw.

Something inside Jacob must have sensed the messenger had been sent to change him. Jacob asked for a blessing. The messenger gave Jacob a new identity and a new name. Jacob became Israel, one who wrestled with God and who came through. Then the messenger left.

Jacob was blessed. But he was a changed man in another way. He would forever after walk with a limp. In the tussle with the messenger, Jacob's hip was thrown out of joint. After that, every step he took would remind him of his path and his direction, of where and of who he had been and of the man God now called him to be. He was no longer a deceiving trickster. He was by no means perfect but he was one who had wrestled, truly wrestled with God in order to become a better man, the one who didn't take the easy way out.

What does all of this say about our wrestling with the race issue, as a people, as a nation, but also as a church family, as we have said we want to do?

Acknowledgment of some fear and anxiety.

Prayer that is honest and self-aware.

Demonstration of good will.

We would be wise to do those things first. But there is no way around what we have to do . . . if we want to get to the promised land of reconciliation.

We shouldn't fool ourselves to think that we can simply lie down and go to sleep one night, then wake up the next day and walk right into the camp of our estranged brother with a free pass. No, there is wrestling to do. Not physical wrestling, but a contention nonetheless. We must contend with the truth of America's history between black and white and how that history still reaches forward to affect our todays and tomorrows.

Yes, as with Jacob and his date with Esau, we must wrestle first, a direct engagement with each other that must be undertaken. But it is even more important that we wrestle with the truth, for without real truth there is no real reconciliation. And we have a hard time in America telling and hearing the real truth of who we have been toward African Americans as a country. In the same way, we have a hard time acknowledging how we have all contributed to our national dysfunction as a family in regard to race. Yes, we all must wrestle with the truth and with God.

When we have wrestled, when we have contended honestly with the truth with prayer with goodwill toward each other, when we have striven and proven to God that we seek forgiveness, then and only then we might ask for a new beginning, as Jacob did.

We may find that we come away from the experience with a limp. The fact is that America already walks with a limp in regard to race. But, once we've wrestled, at least our limp might remind us that we have taken on the truth and been changed by it. And when daylight begins to emerge on a new day for race in America, then we might be so bold as to ask God for a blessing, as Jacob did. And, as with Jacob, we might be given a new identity and a new future as a nation and as a people, together.

With God's help, let us be about that work here at Caldwell. Amen.