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Holding On

Genesis 32:26

There was a time during the Civil War when it appeared that the Union would not prevail and that Lincoln had no chance of being re-elected. During those dark days Lincoln was quoted as saying, "I am not leaving the table til the last card is played." One of Lincoln's greatest struggles was finding a Union General with the same level of perseverance. Historians have pointed out that the North always had the resources to bring the war to a successful conclusion. All that was missing was the will of Union Generals to fully exploit their advantage.

One of the most difficult moments in the Civil War for Abraham Lincoln came in the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg. This battle in July of 1863 was the first Union victory against the Confederate army commanded by Robert E. Lee. Lincoln had been frustrated throughout the war by the unwillingness of his Generals to use their superior forces to go after Lee. When Lincoln received the news that General Meade had defeated Lee at Gettysburg he celebrated in the belief that one Union General had at last grasped the nature of the challenge.

On the following day Lincoln's joy evaporated when he learned that General Meade had allowed Lee to escape the battlefield with his forces intact. Lincoln was quoted as saying, "We had them in the hollow of our hand, but we didn't close the hand." Once again the war was prolonged because a General was not willing to press his advantage to crush the rebellion.

Lincoln kept looking for a General with the tenacity to bring the war to a conclusion. In March of 1864 Lincoln promoted Grant to take charge of all Union forces. Grant understood what Lincoln wanted and he, too, was prepared to stay at the table til the last card was played. As Grant was moving to confront Lee for the first time at the horribly bloody Battle of the Wilderness he told reporters, "If you see the President tell him for me that whatever happens there will be no turning back." When Grant failed to defeat Lee in that battle, he was true to his word. He refused to turn back. He kept the enemy in his grasp until the Union prevailed (Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided, Part 5, PBS Documentary, 2009).

A similar drama unfolds in the 32nd chapter of Genesis. There we find Jacob engaged in a life long struggle to become the kind of person who can stay at the table til the last card is played. Jacob had spent a life time cutting corners, gaming the system, and when a crisis came, always running away. But the day came when there was no place left to run. God had called him to return to the land of his father and the family from which he was alienated. There Jacob will be forced to come to terms with the brother he had cheated. He knows that this will be a dangerous meeting for him because Esau had been determined to kill him.

Jacob plans carefully for the meeting by sending on ahead of him gifts to appease his angry brother. But he worries that gifts may not be enough to compensate for a lost birthright and a stolen blessing. This is a situation in which Jacob understands he is no longer in control. There are no tricks that can bail him out of this one. In a calculated move Jacob sends his family across the Jabbok River

so that they can encounter Esau first. Jacob stays behind to spend the night on the shore line alone. He plans to join the others when it is clear that Esau has not set a trap.

Then something unexpected happens. Jacob is assaulted by a stranger in the darkness. He does not know who the attacker is, but he struggles with all his power. The wrestling match continues all through the night. The stranger seems too strong for Jacob to defeat. Then just before morning Jacob seems to be gaining the upper hand. The stranger calls out to be set free before the sun comes up, but Jacob is determined to press his advantage. He wants to make the stranger pay. He is determined to find out who the stranger is.

Without warning the stranger touches Jacob's hip and leaves him crippled. In that moment Jacob realizes that the stranger has been holding back until now. The crippling touch could have come at any time. Jacob knows he is defeated but he refuses to let go. He holds on to the stranger with all the force he can summon. But it is no longer the grip of a manipulator or a trickster. It is the grip of one who is in desperate need. It is the grip of a drowning man. Jacob is holding on to keep from going under as he cries out for a blessing (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, page 18).

Jacob has arrived at the moment that Rudyard Kipling described in his poem, *If*.

If you can force your heart and
nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after
they are gone
And so hold on when there is
nothing in you
Except the will which says
to them, "Hold on".

Jacob has at last become a man who will not leave the table until the last card is played.

The card for which Jacob is holding out is an authentic blessing. Jacob can no longer be helped by stealing a blessing meant for someone else. The time for shortcuts and gaming the system is past. He is now a profoundly wounded man who is desperate for a gracious word that can speak to his brokenness. What Jacob does not realize is that God has been holding on to him throughout his life. God's love was surrounding Jacob even when he was busy inflicting unnecessary wounds on himself and others. God's blessing was always there for him.

Jesus understood his ministry as the work of blessing those who are wounded. In the 14th chapter of Matthew Jesus is teaching a large gathering of people who have followed him to an isolated place late in the day. His disciples advise him that this is an untenable situation. The people must be fed and it is too late in the day to go and purchase food. They can no longer handle this crowd. Their only alternative is to dismiss this huge crowd. They have no choice but to cut and run.

What the disciples do not understand is that Jesus' compassion cannot be so easily dismissed. Jesus refuses to send these wounded people away. He holds on to the crowd and sends his disciples to search for loaves and fishes. In the end the people are miraculously fed.

It is the same blessing that transformed a wounded man named Jacob. The blessing continues to work in the lives of wounded people like us. Jesus will not leave the table til the last card is played. At his table the last card is always the miracle of grace.