

Has God Got a Name for You?

Genesis 32: 22-31 Matthew 14: 13-21

Everyone has a name. Everything gets a name. Everything has at least one name, sometimes more. It's common for us to have a first, middle, and last name, courtesy of our parents, with married women adding a name upon marriage (and men do, too, now sometimes in hyphenated relationships). A woman married more than once can string them along. All of Zsa Zsa Gabor's names would take a while to rattle off. (You guys know who Zsa Zsa Gabor is; millennials ask "who?")

Simply because your parents gave you a name doesn't mean that that is your name. A member in the Weirsdale church was Earl Scales whose daddy owned Key Scales Ford in Leesburg. They were a citrus grove owning family on Lake Weir for years and Earl owned and ran the big citrus packing house in Weirsdale. Although named Earl, he picked up the nickname "Steamboat" in high school as an unstoppable running back. It stuck; I never heard anyone call him Earl. "Steamboat" and his wife Leslie, a school board member nearly 20 years ago, had a son who they named Earl Scales, Jr. However, the name Earl didn't last for him either as he is now known as "Bubba" Scales. I don't know how he acquired the name. He owns a birding store in Gainesville that advertises daily on public radio. I wouldn't be surprised if the family gave up the idea of naming a male child Earl since they wouldn't likely be using it.

Names form a part of our identity. Like your name or hate it, it's your name. Sometimes names find us, like Steamboat for his football exploits. Or we can gain titles like Reverend or Doctor or Congressman or Governor, or add initials – shorthand for names – like CPA for accountants or JD for lawyers. There are other descriptive names like Mom or Dad, teacher or masseuse – just seeing if you're still listening. We might have work names; I'm named a "Prime Time Teller" for Regions Bank. That seems to mean that I'm a teller, part time, and don't work on Wednesdays.

God is on the naming thing. God has two names in the Judeo-Christian tradition; Yahweh and Jehovah. There are a whole slew of other names because when you're God, the range of names for who and what you are at different times to different people seems boundless. You'll remember that God lets the humans name all the animals in the creation story, but God also comes up with some names for his humans, the ones who are special to God. And that means something.

Let's start with that rascal Jacob to see if he has any tricks up his sleeve. Some tricks would be helpful because he's received word from his emissaries who were sent seeking his estranged brother Esau's favor. Word is that his brother is fast approaching with a hefty 400 men with him and wants to meet him. Recalling how poorly he exploited his twin brother, Jacob has good reason to be fearful of this meeting. Four hundred men is not an escort; it's a battalion. That's far more than anything Jacob is prepared to counter, and infinitely more than he wants to try talking his way through.

Jacob divides his large herds, sending many of them across the Jabbok River to relative safety, and divides those remaining into gifts for his brother in an attempt to buy him off before he actually catches up with Jacob.

Having completed his preparations for his brother's arrival with his 400 man army, Jacob sends the closest members of the family across the river, and camps for the night in expectation of Esau's arrival. That night, Jacob is alone. He encounters a man who wrestles with him – a man is how the story introduces this figure. (Was it Jesus? NO! That would be a dingbat idea.) Neither of them is able to gain complete advantage over the other, and the struggle goes on all night.

As dawn begins to break, the mystery man showed he had a trick up his sleeve for Jacob. The scripture says, *He touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched.* If the man had hit Jacob in the **pocket** of his hip, it might have broken his hip. But it says the **socket** of his hip and sounds like a dislocation. This could only be done with a very precise and very powerful shot to the inside of the upper thigh. Now, assuming you're familiar with the male anatomy, you'll realize that this puts Jacob's "delicate parts" in harm's way. It's also an indication of how desperately the mystery man wanted to get away, but apparently even this excruciatingly painful strike did not cause Jacob to release the mystery man. The man pleads with Jacob, "*Let me go, for it is daybreak.*" From this, we can assume that daybreak is not something the mystery man wants to be around to witness. This clearly indicates that the mystery man is Dracula. Just kidding.

Jacob, ever wily, seizes the opportunity. He conditions the mystery man's release on obtaining a blessing. This is the first clear clue that Jacob's opponent is more than a mere mortal. One does not seek a "blessing" *per se* from another person. And Jacob didn't need more wealth of any kind, so he wasn't seeking a pay-off. Security would have been nice right about now, but Jacob doesn't ask for protection or refuge. He asks for a "blessing."

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann realizes how exceptional the context is around this story and its implications. He wrote: *If this other one is God, what does it mean that Jacob has come to a draw with him? What kind of God is it who will be pressed into a draw by this man? And what kind of man is Jacob that he can force a draw, even against heaven? This is no ordinary man. And certainly no ordinary God! Clearly, this is no ordinary story.* So, this is a really interesting story that deserves our attention.

Jacob's "blessing" request is met with a question from the man in reply:

"What is your name?"

He answers, "Jacob."

"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Isra-el, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

The man's blessing of a new name is peculiar – *struggles with God* perhaps – but moreover it conveys a new identity for Jacob, the name Israel becoming the name of the one who with his wives bore the twelve brothers who would become the twelve tribes of God's chosen people. This struggle that may have been an odd confrontation of the mortal and the divine in a match that achieved a victory for each one, that redefined the relationship between God and his people.

So, Jacob gets his answer, his blessing, his new name. Then Jacob promptly turns the question and asks back: *Please tell me your name.* The reply comes as a question: *Why do you ask my name?*

That reply either means that Jacob has crossed a line in his questioning, or that the question itself is superfluous – Jacob **knows** with whom he has wrestled all night, the name is irrelevant. Maybe it's a combination of both – 'You know who I am, and therefore you know better than to ask that question.'

The ending leaves the meaning of it all quite enigmatic. What is certainly impressive is Jacob's tenacious persistence, having struggled all night, and gaining the peculiar blessing of his opponent. It makes us wonder if God (assuming it was God) engaged this struggle with Jacob purposely to bring about a new relationship to this chosen one and wily troublemaker. Jacob's story indicates the kind of faithful striving that God expects and rewards. In this case, the struggle yields a surprising blessing – a new name, a new identity, and a new relationship with God.

In the story from Matthew, the disciples think they have the question and the answer, and don't seem too inclined to deviate from their assumption.

Jesus had drawn a huge crowd in a remote location, far outside the pizza delivery zone. Jesus thought it would be wise to put some distance between himself and any news-making since his mentor, John the Baptist, had just been beheaded. Jesus wants to lay low, out of the public eye. But, like any celebrity, his fans find him out. Jesus ministers to the crowds all day. As daylight's end approaches, the disciples realize that there are going to be problems if they don't send the people back to the surrounding towns.

When the disciples mention to Jesus this idea of sending the people home, he confounds them by saying, *"They don't need to go away. You feed them."* We can imagine the disciples looking at each other, like 'did he just say what I thought he said?' They blubber about what food they have with them: five loaves of bread and two fish. They would do this in a whiny tone of voice. If there is a miracle to be performed, surely Jesus is the one to do it, not the disciples.

Jesus finds the limited food supply irrelevant. Jesus didn't ask: *Do you have enough food?* He can probably guess that no one saw this coming and that they're woefully unprepared. Jesus doesn't want to know what they **can't** do; Jesus wants to see what they **can** do. Yes, they barely had food for themselves. They didn't want to give that up, and it certainly wouldn't make any difference if they did.

Frustrated, Jesus shows them how it's done. With overtones of communion ritual, Jesus turns to God in prayer before giving the food. Jesus seeks the strength of God, enjoining it with his own faithfulness, creating a strength-to-strength relationship sufficient to feed the five thousand and have food left over. We don't know how it happened – that's irrelevant, too – but God and Jesus together made it happen.

In this object lesson, the disciples are taught to bring their faithful strengths together before God. Together with God, they can achieve the miraculous. The key ingredients are faithfulness in the providence of God, and striving to gain from God the blessing that God really wants to give us.

This is where the disciples differ notably from Jacob. You'll recall how Jacob hung on in his contest, despite being locked in a stalemate against a powerful opponent, despite having been painfully injured in the struggle. Jacob persists relentlessly, eventually yielding an advantage from his opponent. He seeks the "blessing" that this one can provide.

The disciples faced a seemingly impossible situation, too. Their level of faith caused them to look not to God, but to their larder. "What have we got?" they seem to ask themselves, trying to solve the problem on their own without seeking God in faith. When it came to meeting the challenge, the disciples failed miserably. Jesus showed them how it's done. Reach out to God in faithful action and be ready for a miracle.

For Jacob in his wrestling match, the blessing was a new name, a new relationship with his God. Jacob had earned that blessing with his faithful diligence and persistence, and showed his mettle. This was one on whom God could count in the future, one who deserved the blessing and would advance God's will and purpose with God's people.

For the disciples, what name did they earn? Faithless, useless, unreliable, and weak might suit as a start.

For us – the disciples of today – what name do we bear before God? Are we any better than the disciples around Jesus? How can we engage the struggle for God's Kingdom of justice and peace, of compassion and community, of hope and new life, and gain the name that honors Jesus and his good news for all of God's struggling people.

In Matthew, the lessons are usually addressed to the church, to the community of faithful disciples. He wants us in the churches to know that the miraculous is always within our reach if we strive together before God faithfully.

May we strive for that name that reflects a faithful spirit, a willingness to serve and to sacrifice, and an eagerness to bear the light and blessing of our living Lord to the world in its darkness and painful struggles. God would be delighted to give us that name, but we need to earn it.