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“A New Name”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Genesis 32:22–31; Psalm 17:1–7, 15; Matthew 14:3–21

“What’s in a name?”

That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,”
Juliet posits in the famous balcony scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

What’s in the name Jacob was given at birth?

If it comes from the Hebrew word *aqeb* (עֲקֵבִי), as some scholars suggest,
it implies the idea of last or lowest. It can mean the rear guard of an army,
or a person’s rear end, or the print of one’s foot,
or might I suggest even... “tar heel!”

Traditionally, we have heard it to mean “heel-grabber”, as the story of
Jacob’s birth has him coming into the world trailing his twin, Esau,
hanging on for dear life to his brother’s heel.

Perhaps you saw the video that went viral of the twin girls
born close to Father’s Day in Ohio this past June.

A rare set of monoamniotic or mono mono twins, Jenna and Jillian Thistlewaite,
[came into this life holding hands](#). How sweet!

Maybe that was Jacob’s intent, but his hand slipped,
and he grabbed for the next nearest appendage, the heel.

And so he’s labeled for life as overreaching, or supplanting one’s natural order,
as last and lowest, someone capable of deceitfulness or of opportunism.

Who does that to a baby?

Who saddles a child with a name that denigrates him or her for life?
Is that fair? Is that something that God desires for a child of the covenant?

Jacob has just fled the land of his father-in-law, Laban, without telling him he is absconding with his two daughters, his grandchildren, and with a good portion of his servants and flocks.

And now he turns to enter the land of Esau, his estranged brother, and prepares to receive the full-force wrath of his brother upon himself as well as upon his family.

Jacob is trapped, hemmed in, really. He can't go back from where he has come, having burned that bridge with Laban.

Nor can he go forward to where he is going without meeting another would-be assailant, his angry twin, Esau.

And so, at this point of grace, he divides his family and goods into two groups, hoping to save at least some of them, then turns to the God of his Father, Isaac, in a moment of self-awareness and honesty that prefigures the prodigal son as he prays for his salvation.

And sending his wives Leah and Rachel on across the ford with their servants and maidservants, he is left alone to face his demons, or God, whichever shows up first to the wrestling mat.

In the dark of night, a man shows up and wrestles with Jacob until daybreak.

In the Bible, please note that important things often take place in the darkness, literally, and at people's darkest moments, figuratively.

A dream? A vision? Jacob wrestling with his own conscience? Divine intervention?

Jacob and the man wrestle, the two of them,

unable to untangle themselves from one another:

the man wanting to be free before dawn

and Jacob insisting to know the man's name before freeing him.

Jacob asks for a blessing, as collateral,
and the man asks to know Jacob's name.

What's in a name?

When I was at Massanetta with the Middle Schoolers a few weeks ago,
I was placed randomly in a small group with teens I had
never met, and with two other adult advisors.

There were five teen girls in our group and five teen boys, all from different places.
One handsome boy looked to be Asian with dark skin, dark eyes and hair,
but his name was not Asian at all. His name was Kyle.

And the adult male advisor in our group was blonde-haired and blue-eyed,
and his name was Kemp.

Our group dynamic was good, generally, with everyone contributing
to conversations and activities during our time together.

But about a day in, the young teen, Kyle, decided that he wanted us to call him Billy.
I don't know why, except that he seemed to have an alter ego
who liked to be silly, which rhymed with Billy.

Neither name seemed to fit his countenance to me.
and I wondered if he were struggling with his own identity somehow,
as if neither name fit him exactly.

And in the process of changing his name, Kyle and the other boys began
to call the adult male chaperone Kitty because they realized that he was gay,
and they were struggling with that.

And honestly, I couldn't tell during the course of the conference if they were
wrestling with a demon or with God over this issue.

The adult advisor, Kemp, never tried to hide who he was.

He admitted early on that he was happily married to his partner
and that he had two step-daughters from his partner's previous marriage.

He told me that his church had asked him to chaperone,
and he agreed to come only if it would not cause any waves at Massanetta.

He was a great guy, a sweet, gentle, spiritual man.

But the wrestling continued within our group day to day

with the boys eventually cajoling Kemp to have his face painted with cat whiskers, which he did very graciously but washed off before dinner.

And on the last morning, as we were sitting in a circle and completing our evaluation forms, Kyle, aka Billy, announced that our group dynamic consisted of five boys, five girls, and Kitty.

And I could not help but feel Kemp's pain in being singled out and taunted, especially at a church conference, at the end of a church conference, where we should have learned better.

What's in a name? What power lies in knowing someone's name to hurt or to help?

Jacob and the man continue to wrestle. as night breaks toward dawn.

The man wrested Jacob's derogatory name from him,
just as Jacob once wrested a blessing from his blind father's hand,
not to tease Jacob but to affirm him and confirm a new name for him,
Israel, which can mean God rules, or God has power, or
God has met a sub-chief, a worthy head of God's clan.

It is a name of honor, not a name of shame;

it is a name with purpose, not a name of derision;

it is a name that honors the one from the rear with the front seat.

It is a name denoting continued relationship with a God who covenants to be in long-term relationship with Jacob/Israel, and with his children, and with his children's children, for better and for worse,| for richer and for poorer... not unlike a conferring of new names within a marriage ceremony.

But the man will not reciprocate in sharing his own name,

although he does consent to leave Jacob with his blessing before the dawn of the new day.

And Jacob may have walked with a limp thereafter, but it was a limp of hope
and a limp of blessing, and a limp that reminded him of his constant
need of God and of God's reciprocal need of him, too.

An interesting little article in this month's *Atlantic Magazine*
features a new youth movement in our culture
which author Marc Spitz has labeled Twee, T-W-E-E.

(Spitz, Marc. *Twee: The Gentle Revolution in Music, Books, television, Fashion and Film*)

Twee, Spitz says, is a secular movement of young people
who have a healthy suspicion of adulthood; who cultivate a passion project,
say for organic food or for a T-shirt company;
who hate bullies; who take up for underdogs;
who don't mind standing on the unsettled ground of their own vulnerability;
and who have a steadfast focus on humanity's essential goodness.

They tend to be nerdy, geeky, dorky kinds of people.

They tend to like Mickey Mouse, Ferdinand the Bull, and the contemplative
elephant in Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*.

As article writer James Parker says, "The point of these characters
is the bravery with which they assert their tender selves.

Or perhaps the tenderness with which they assert their brave selves."

In a broken world, the Twees take a stand for beauty.

Spitz describes Twee as a revolution: a gentle one to be sure.

The article relates an incident in Boston, where two former college football players
were roughing up a homeless man, which could have resulted in a fatality
were it not for the intervention of a petite woman in her 20s
who asked not to be named.

The woman intervened by placing her body between the victim and his attackers,
a paradigmatic instance of Tweedom: defending the vulnerable,
disarming the tormentor, being strong, being Twee.

(Parker, James. "The Twee Revolution". *The Atlantic*. July/August 2014, p. 36-37)

Hey, I have some Twees at my house, I wanted to say as I read the article.
Hedge and I have managed to raise gentle children in a not so gentle world.
And we have beaten ourselves up at times
 for not encouraging them to be more competitive,
for not teaching them to stand up for themselves,
 for coming too quickly to their aid,
for letting them opt for music and art at times over sports and academics.
They might not be the most overtly religious children in the world,
 but when push comes to shove, they are very Twee in their protection
 of the vulnerable, in their love of beauty, and in their innate belief
 in the goodness and worth of all humanity.
Perhaps Twees are the offspring of old hippies and free spirits—
 the Twees not falling too far from the old trees.
I wish I had been more Twee in standing up
 for the male advisor in my group at Massanetta
who was enduring the subtle but incessant taunting of the boys in the group.
They tried to give him a new name, a derogatory name that demeaned his character,
 even at a Christian conference.
I'm sure he felt very "Jacob," very least or low at times, like the butt of their jokes.
But when we wrote our affirmations to one another at the end of the conference,
 we passed around a sheet of paper for each person in the group
 and wrote notes reflecting our experience with each one
 during the week.
And I tried in my response to Kemp, to be very Twee:
 to relate to him how profoundly stalwart and kind I experienced him to be,
 a true reflection of Christ in his way of reacting to all of the youth
with consistency, honesty, transparency,
 and tolerance of their misunderstanding.

And I noted many similar remarks on the sheet, *especially from the young girls*,
as it passed from hand to hand around the circle,
affirming Kemp's right to be Kemp,
and the powerful impact he had had on the others in our group
in living out Christ's love as one of the meek, blessed with earthly inheritance.
And my hope and my prayer is that Kemp came away from that experience
with a new name: brave, honored, valued, dignified, beautiful man-child of God.

Our church is in a state of transition, and at times,
it feels like we are wrestling with God for a new name.
I wish we could attract the Twees; I think they are in tune to something of value.
I wish we could be a little more Twee ourselves: protecting the vulnerable,
loving beauty, embracing the gentle and contemplative, calling out the bullies,
standing up for the powerless without self-aggrandizing.

Because to me, Twee sounds a lot like Jesus.

"That which we would call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." Amen.