



Sunday, October 19, 2025

Genesis 32:22-31 / Luke 18:1-8 (Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Tony Acompanado

In seminary, pastors are taught many things to prepare us for a life in ministry. We learn how to read and interpret scripture, how to create and lead worship, how to lead a Bible study, offer pastoral care, and so much more. Unfortunately, seminary doesn't prepare us for everything we might encounter when we answer this calling.

A few weeks ago after a funeral here at church, I needed to go to Target to pick up a few things for a classroom blessing I was doing later that afternoon. When I got to Target I grabbed a cart and began wandering around the store to get all the items on my list. Once I had everything, I made my way to the checkout. When I got there I noticed that the self-checkout area was empty, but then I read that dreaded sign reminding me not to use the self-checkout registers because I had more than the 12 item limit. So, instead I made my way to an open register where an employee was and began unloading my cart.

The clerk beginning scanning my items and as I was waiting for him to finish I noticed another employee—a young woman in her 20's who was overseeing the self-checkout area. She was straightening up the area and putting away the baskets previous customers left behind. And just then she glanced over my direction, and she not only made eye contact, but I could tell that she also noticed that I was wearing my clerical collar, and when she did she began to make a reverent bowing motion and said, *"Hello Father."* I didn't know whether to be upset that she thought I was a priest, or if I should say, *"Bless you my child and ask her to kiss my ring."*

Think about the many names you carry, whether good or bad, desired or unwanted, accurate or not. For some I'm Pastor, Pastor Tony, Anthony or just plain Tony. I am Dad, brother, coach, friend. My best friend calls me T. However, those aren't my only names. There are others. Sometimes I'm known as impatient, obsessive, or stupid. Other times I'm known by names that should never be spoken aloud.

Names are powerful. Some we have chosen; while others have been given to us. But names are more than just a label. They have the power to create and the power to destroy. Perhaps that's why names and name changes are so significant. They can describe relationships, one's qualities or characteristics, or a change in direction.

We see that today when a woman and sometimes a man take the last name of the one they're marrying. It indicates a change in status and relationship. Monks and nuns receive a new name when they take vows. Adopted children often take the last name of the new parents, showing that they now belong and have a place in the family. All those signify becoming a different person and entering a new life.

Name changes are also found throughout scripture, and they're always significant. Abram is changed to Abraham. Sarai is changed to Sarah, Saul became Paul, Simon became Peter. These changes represent a new relationship with God, and a new calling through which God would bless them and others through them.

In today's Old Testament reading we're given the story of Jacob. But first, I think it would be helpful for us to take a moment to remember the significance that names held in biblical times. Far from merely identifying a person, names in Jacob's culture reveal one's essential character and sometimes their destiny.

Jacob – the second born of the twins granted to Isaac and Rebekah. He's not only the younger of the two but also the more slight of stature, and so he learns early on to live by his wits rather than his strength. His brother Esau, on the other hand, is a wild and unpredictable, and as the eldest, is heir to his father's blessing and fortune.



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In today's Old Testament reading, Jacob is returning to the place of his birth twenty years later after ruining his brother Esau's life through deceit and manipulation. Jacob's name literally means the supplanter, the usurper, heel grabber, trickster, deceiver, or simply the cheat.

He came out of his mother's womb grabbing at his twin brother's heel. He finagled his brother Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup. He deceived his blind father and stole the blessing that rightly belonged to Esau as the firstborn. Now he's a man on the run. He's running from an angry brother who wants to kill him. He's running from his past. But mostly he's running from himself.

Maybe you know what that's like. Maybe you've been there. Maybe that's where you are today – right now. At some time or another we all spend the night wrestling with our past, our words and actions, our identity, and the names that have shaped and defined us. Jacob's name fits him well, but God knows that isn't his true name.

The man whom Jacob is wrestling with asks, "*What is your name?*" But the man isn't asking for information, he's asking for a confession. Jacob will never know who he can become until he first acknowledges who he is. In confessing his name, Jacob is completely vulnerable and places himself into the hands of God. He cannot deceive, manipulate, scheme, trick, or steal his way out this time. His confessing becomes his prevailing. We all live with multiple names. Some names have been given to us by others. Other names we've given ourselves. Some are life giving and nurturing. Others cut deep leaving us wounded or dying. Names define us in the eyes of others and ourselves.

What is your name? Who are you? What names do others call you? What names do you call yourself? What names do you cringe at hearing or can barely speak? Unfaithful? Unworthy? Unlovable? Hypocrite, cheater? Alcoholic or addict? Divorced, widow, too old, too young, or unwanted? Failure, lazy? Coward, crazy, worthless, ugly, irresponsible, bully, disappointment, abuser, different, victim, abnormal? Every one of us could add to this list. We know the names all too well, and we've believed them and held on to them for far too long.

Admitting the power of these names over us implies a significant amount of vulnerability. But it's only as we confess the names that we wear can we also hear God's unrelenting response, "**No. You shall no longer be called that!**"

In the nighttime of wrestling God asks each one of us, "What is your name?" he does so with a promise to change our name, to make us a new person, and give us a new life. No doubt it's a hard question, and one we'd rather avoid. It can leave us feeling scared, ashamed, vulnerable, and defeated.

Names as we know, can limit us, hurt us, or even destroy us. But they can also heal and make us alive again in a new way. God invites us again and again through the cleansing waters of baptism to come – to come and be washed clean of all the names that diminish us and instead be reminded of the true name and new identity God gifts us.

So, my friends, I dare you to answer God's question. Don't keep quiet. Don't back down. Don't walk away. Hold on for the blessing. Speak the names that you carry. Confess them. Shout them. Whisper them. Then listen and prevail. Listen for God to say, "**No. You shall no longer be called that.** That's not who you are. You are My Beloved. You are My Child. Forgiven. Set Free. Redeemed. Beautiful. Enough." God speaks this holy and precious name to you and says, "**This is who you are! Now go and become what you have heard.**" Thanks be to God. Amen.