Next Sunday is final week in Annual Membership Renewal series. Many have signed up online (link in weekly update) or by filling out membership letter. Thank you. Our board oversees finances, advises pastors. Last week Lisa Ruby from our board talked about giving, this week, Steve Gray.

_Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone._

Final chapter sums up the three main concepts of the book: _Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart_

Brené Brown’s research says what she calls “true belonging”—the kind of belonging where you don’t have to pretend to be something you’re not—requires combining two different things:

1. Learning to be vulnerable (soft front): express your true feelings, reveal weakness, acknowledge need, consider the possibility you might be wrong, empathize, learn how to apologize.

2. Learning to stand up for yourself or others or for things you believe in, even if it means losing your standing in the group (strong back)

Almost seem like opposites: Some are good at being vulnerable. Others are good at taking a stand even if it upsets people. But _spiritual task_ is to _cultivate vulnerability_ at the same time that we _cultivate the courage_ to stand alone.

Brené Brown says “the wilderness” is where we work this out.

It’s where we “grow a spine” while embracing our vulnerability.

One of most memorable sermons by Sharonda & Carla’s pastor, Dr. Renee Jackson.
Sermon on Jacob at Jabbok, Gen 32.

Rehearse this story. Backdrop to every story in Genesis is Eden: two humans in a garden walking with God in the cool of the day, and they are both “naked but not ashamed.”
The opposite of this picture is “the naked dream”: Jr. High in Detroit, with friends, next thing I know, running home through neighborhood naked—and can’t find where I live. [Years later: being at church huge crowd, look down and realize I’m still in my PJ’s] Who has had some version of this dream?

Nakedness is universal sign of vulnerability—feeling exposed. Wilderness is where we stop freaking out about our vulnerability and just embrace it, often because we can’t outrun it.

Jacob is the founder of God’s new community, called Israel. Jacob receives his new name, Israel, in a classic wilderness experience.

Jacob’s story bookended by two wilderness experiences. One is after he stole birthright from his twin brother Esau and had to flee for his life. He came from a wealthy family (grandpa Abraham had greatly prospered, passed that wealth on to father Isaac). But Jacob had leave it all behind to flee wrath of Esau…with instructions to find a wife among the people of his Uncle Laban.

First night away from home, exhausted, alone, afraid—lays his head on a rock has a dream: ladder reaches to heaven angels are going up and down and God promises to protect & prosper him and when time comes he will return to his homeland. Wilderness is where he begins to embrace his vulnerability for first time. When he’s most vulnerable he has this wonderful God dream.

He goes on to Uncle Laban’s, falls in love with his cousin Rachel. He works 7 years for Laban to gain Rachel. On wedding night, Laban switches out Rachel for Leah. After plying groom Jacob with wine, Jacob consummates wedding night with Leah. Has to work 7 more years to get his true love Rachel. He’s getting a taste of his own medicine from Laban’s trickery: Jacob means “heal grasper”—Esau & Jacob twins; Esau came out as firstborn, but Jacob as grabbing his heel—sign of rivalry.

Jacob prospers in Labanland…so much so that he becomes a threat to his Uncle and has to pack up wives, kids, herds and return home…where his brother Esau is waiting.
Dramatic encounter happens at river Jabbok (rhymes with Jacob) just beyond where Esau lives, having also married and grown powerful. Jacob is in wilderness petrified again.

First he sends servants ahead to flatter Esau (they call him Lord, etc.). They return to say, “Esau is on his way with 400 men” Egads!

For first time in Genesis (ch. 32) someone’s prayer is recorded. It’s Jacobs prayer. Won’t read it but it’s a vulnerable prayer. Prayer of a man running out of tricks. Then he uses his last one: sends gifts to Esau to mollify him (and show Esau that he’s a powerful man too.) He has no idea if gifts are received.

Night falls. He sends his wives and kids across the river and spends the night, it says, alone. Sleep escapes him as he fusses.

Jacobs family line in Genesis has belonging issues. Don’t have a good track record resolving sibling rivalry. Siblings are natural rivals for parents’ approval, inheritance. But if the human family is to survive long term, the rivals have to somehow work it out.

Cain & Abel are first rivals. Ends with murder. Jacob’s father Isaac and his brother Ishmael are rivals. Ends with expulsion of Ishmael. (Jews-Christian trace lineage to Abraham thru Issac, Muslims thru Ishmael, so not without contemporary significance.) Such are the nighttime musings of Jacob anticipating his reunion with Esau!

Then Jacob has his strange wilderness encounter. He’s out of tricks, no where to run no where to hide. Gen. 32: 22-32

Who is mysterious figure? Some say it’s God. Jacob wrestles God to a draw and extracts a blessing in the end. Just like when Moses asks God what his name is, this mystery figure refuses.

Some say the figure is Jacob’s own double. Jacob is wrestling with himself. Or his false self wrestling with his true self. No wonder it’s a draw. No wonder his double responds to the question, “What’s your name?” as if its an absurd question.
Some say the figure is Esau’s doppelganger. Jacob wrestles with an apparition of Esau. In end, Jacob secures Esau’s blessing. Which happens the next day: Esau arrives and nobody dies, nobody expelled. They embrace, exchange emails, become FB friends.

It could be Jacob never figured out whether he was wrestling with his own double, or with Esau’s doppelganger or with God…. because it was all three at the same time.

Have you ever had one of those sessions where you run out of options, or your normal coping mechanisms aren’t cutting it, and you have it out with God, or maybe you’re having it out with yourself, or maybe you’re having it out with some rival? You can’t tell. But what’s happening to you is you are embracing your vulnerability and growing a spine at the same time.

Jacob comes out of that encounter with an enduring limp.

Brené Brown says, “the cost of true belonging is carrying the pain of the wilderness with us wherever we go.”

My daughter Grace lost her mom at age 19. My sister told her “Losing a parent is the first loss you don’t ever get over.” Grace felt totally understood. What Grace might not have realized is my sister as a young woman had a series of losses: first serious boyfriend in a manic episode broke up with her, married a classmate, who committed suicide; then she fell in love with a man who just before they were to get engaged, got Leukemia-died. Then she lost her mom. We all develop enduring limps in wilderness.

That shared vulnerability—walking with a limp—becomes a new bond between Grace and her aunt. Jacob doesn’t become Israel, founder of a new community until he walks with a limp.

James Collins: companies that transition from good to great are led by CEO’s who have been through a significant personal tragedy, and “lead with a limp.” Able to stand up for their convictions, resist group-think, and be vulnerable. People want to follow them because they inspire trust, not fear.
Last chapter features story of Jen Hatmaker, a writer-blogger who came out as an ally for marriage equality. Lost a lot of friends in her faith world. Paid a professional price. Talks about wilderness as a scary thing, and lonely, but eventually finding others out there. Strangers at first, but share this bond—enduring limp.
[Read selections, pp.151-152]

The limp for many is enduring pain of losing dear friends. Many here could relate. [Serendipitydoodah moms.] That loss is our limp and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Essential for founding a new community born in the wilderness.

Let communion serve as our meditation this morning. Focal point is mysterious figure who also walks with a limp. Has enduring wounds. When we remember him every week we acknowledge those wounds, his broken body. They are nothing to be ashamed of. Somehow, they are key to a new way of walking with God.