

PRAYER IS A WRESTLING MATCH

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Genesis 32:22-31 NRSV

In the days of my youth, I did some stupid things. On one particular night, I was hanging out with friends in the Truman Corners shopping center parking lot down in Grandview, and I guess I was looking to impress some of the older guys I was hanging out with. Someone got the idea to ride on the hood of a car being driven around the lot. Thinking that this was a good idea, I took my turn and climbed up on the hood. I don't even remember the name of the girl driving or the type of car. All I remember about the ride is that it started out as a lark, but as she accelerated it became terrifying. By the end, I recall hanging onto a windshield wiper with my feet dangling down in front of the grill. I shudder to think what could have happened that night. I know of similar foolish stunts that ended tragically. I'm just glad that I was able to hang on. Sometimes in life, hanging on is all we can do.

In the passage from Genesis read this morning, we find Jacob just hanging on, as if that's all that was left for him to do. Jacob, you will recall, is the twin brother of Esau. He was born grasping at his brother's heel, which is what his name literally means—"heel" or perhaps "heel grasper." Figuratively his name means "trickster/over-reacher/supplanter."ⁱ It is as if from the womb, Jacob was trying to get in front of his older brother and be born first. I guess he spent his life wishing he were the first-born son. Trickster is a fitting name for a man who tricked his barely older brother out of his inheritance and deceived his old blind father into giving him the blessing due the oldest son. This was not just any run-of-the-mill blessing, like "have a nice trip" or "God bless you" when someone sneezes;" it was a powerful and unique thing. One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, puts it this way:

For the old man, a blessing is the speaking of a word of great power; it is the conveying of something of the very energy and vitality of his soul to the one he blesses, and this final blessing of his firstborn son is to be the most powerful of all, so much so that once it is given it can never be taken back. And here even for us something of this remains true: we also know that words spoken in deep love or deep hate set things in motion within the human heart that can never be reversed.ⁱⁱ

By stealing this blessing, Jacob betrays his brother and takes power away from him. Esau is furious and the trickster must flee for his life. After twenty years of more trickery and accumulating wives, children, cattle and wealth—all that life has to offer, Jacob still cannot let go of Esau. Jacob returns to his homeland where he must face Esau. Before he crosses back into his own land—the land he stole from Esau—he stops for some alone time. He has received word that his twin is coming to meet him with armed men, and so, like so many of us often do when we are at our wit's end and have exhausted all of our own energy, he asks God for help.

What happens next is the stuff of dreams and nightmares. When night comes and we are alone with our own thoughts, anxieties and fears, the real struggle begins. Things are always worse at night when there is no business to take our minds off of our problems; We toss and turn wrestling inside of ourselves. The same thing

happens to Jacob, but in his case, his wrestling match is not just internal. Jacob is set upon by a stranger, and they wrestle together all night long, neither of them is able to get the upper hand. Who is this stranger? Is it Esau making a surprise attack? Is it a demon or bogeyman of the night? Is it a manifestation of Jacob's own inner struggle? Is it as one commentator put it: "Jacob's wrestling match is the archetype of totality, what Jung calls the Self or God-image in the soul."ⁱⁱⁱ In one sense, the stranger who wrestles with Jacob is all of these things and more. Walter Brueggemann notes that in dreams you often have an adversary who "has many abilities, from many times and places, and these identities merge, so that when you wake up, you can't quite sort out who it was."^{iv} Jacob's struggle certainly has dream-like and multi-faceted qualities to it. His life's struggle is within himself and with his brother in the external world, but there is another struggle also at play: Jacob's struggle with God.

There by the riverside, it is God that Jacob wrestles with. The text is pretty clear on this point. Somehow God appears to Jacob in a form that seems human and that he can strive against. Although God is anthropomorphized throughout scripture and we as Christians worship Jesus Christ as God incarnate, Jewish and Christian tradition have long been uncomfortable with the idea of Jacob's adversary being God. That's why the match is often described as Jacob wrestling an angel, but Jacob's words about seeing the face of God at the end of the passage reveal the identity of his attacker to us. It is strange to thank of God in this very human way, but it is also helpful, as we consider our own struggles of faith.

Near morning, Jacob fights to a draw. Things always look better in the morning, and here, Jacob's adversary seeks to leave him as dawn breaks. Then God takes a cheap shot, so to speak, and touches Jacob's thigh crippling him. If God could have done that all along, why did God wrestle with Jacob all night? There must have been some value in God's eyes to Jacob going through the wrestling match. There is a purpose in the struggle.

Even though his opponent turns to leave, Jacob hangs on and he does not let go. He declares that he will not let go until God blesses him. The trickster is still after a blessing. After twenty years, he still wants a more of what he stole from his brother. This time, however, Jacob cannot get the blessing through his own trickery. This time he must receive the blessing as a gift.^v Although he is persistent, in the end, it is God's choice to bless Jacob. Similarly, our persistence in hanging on to God in the face of adversity may be rewarded by God, but we should never assume that we can manipulate or force God to give us what we want. God's gifts to us remain gifts because they are given freely by God at a time of God's own choosing.

What I want to offer to you this morning, is that prayer, our encounters with God, our most intimate exchanges with the divine, sometimes—many times—are like a wrestling match. When we are buffeted by the events in our lives, when we face our struggles, when we face things the tragic things that are going on in our world and when we are honest about it all, we must wrestle with God. In such moments, it may be all we can do to just hang on. I am not a minister who offers the kind of faith that says, "If you ask for something, then God will give it to you, and if you don't get it, then you must be doing something wrong." I am not the type of minister to say, "Everything will work out for you if you have enough faith. Just pray and have a good attitude, and it will all work out." Sometimes things cannot work out, and you are left to struggle with what to do and what to believe. We do not know why some people died this week on an interstate bridge in Minneapolis and others lived. Is it because some had enough faith and others did not? Is it because some were worthy of life and others were not? I certainly do not believe so. So, we struggle, and we wrestle. If we are honest with ourselves and with each other, sometimes all we can do is just hold on.

For some, it may seem strange to think of prayer in terms of a wrestling match. It's no wonder considering the kinds of prayer that is usually modeled in church. One type of prayer that often occurs is a sort of wimpy "Hail Mary" pass offered at the last minute in times of need. Only when we are desperate enough do we bother to acknowledge God as being present. Such defeated prayers are offered when we have nothing to lose and when we expect nothing will be gained. Other types of prayers are spoken in tones of self-congratulation, as if we are certain God will be compelled to do what we want. Such prayers ignore the unpleasant reality that prayers often

go unanswered and suffering often continues without relief. Yet, if we are honest about our own struggles, questions and doubts and desire for our prayers to be an articulation of our inward selves, then our prayers should be a means of engaging God about the things that really matter in life. If our prayers fail to deal with the confusing places where our beliefs about how things should be collide with how things often really are, then I wonder if they are even worthwhile. We are only given one life and it is often too short to be spent talking with God about things that are inconsequential.

The alternative to wrestling with God is to let go and to miss the potential blessings God may give us. People often believe that the opposite of love is hate, but in reality, the opposite of love is apathy, saying you are not worth the effort of sticking it out and making it work. I encourage young couples I marry to not give up when times get hard, because true love means being determined to work things out even when you do not want to. The same principle is true of our relationship with God. It is better to fight and rail against God than to give up on God. It is better to be honest in our prayers when we feel abandoned and hurt than to offer insincere words of piety or worse no words at all. We say we love God, but we can remain unwilling to do the hard work of remaining faithful in the midst of our conflicts with God. The worst thing we can do to God is not wrestling—far from it! The worst thing we can do is to give up and say to God, “You are not worth the effort.”

I regularly hear from parents and grandparents about how their children and grandchildren grew up in church only to reach adulthood and leave their religious upbringing behind. I also hear the same from the children and grandchildren. “I grew up going to church, but when I got older, I stopped going.” I wonder if it is not because we have prepared them poorly for an adult faith. We have taught them that they must be reverent and respectful to God, which means not questioning God or getting angry with God. They have heard the message that life will work out for them if they will only remain faithful, but as they mature they discover that bad things happen even to people who say their prayers and do all the right things. We have failed to model for our children what is to be done when things do not work out well. Somewhere along the line our children should come to learn that it is okay to say to God, “Why did this happen to me? I am angry with you God. I am sad and I am alone. I do not feel your presence, God, or see a silver lining in this situation.” Instead, our young people hear the message that to believe is to never struggle. So when struggles come, they give up on belief.

In my opinion, the Bible has more examples of people praying and asking God why they have not received what they want than it has examples of people praying and immediately receiving what they have asked for. From the prayers of Jacob by the Jabbok to the Psalms to the prayer of Jesus on the cross to the prayer of Paul regarding his thorn in the flesh, we find prayers of people wrestling with God. One of my seminary professors, Samuel Balentine, writes about how we Christians have lost our ability to lament. Despite the fact that prayers of lament fill our scriptures, we have ceased to pray, “Why God, why? Why have you let this happen to me? Justice! Give me justice! Change this! Change this! Make right what is wrong!” He writes that we have given up lament and we are worse off for doing so, because when we stop asking God “Why?” and asking God to act, we begin to accept things as they are. We are left with an unjust world, a painful world, a world that we can do nothing to change. When we lament, however, we keep God in the conversation.^{vi} We keep wrestling and we refuse to let go. Like Jacob, we hang on for dear life.

I wonder how Jacob hung on to God, refusing to let the deity go. Was he hanging on to God’s heel like he hung onto Esau’s heel in their mother’s womb? Perhaps it was even more intimate than that. There is a sculpture by the artist Jacob Epstein called *Jacob and the Angel* (remember what I said about the tradition of thinking of this match as something other than a battle with God). It shows Jacob and his adversary locked in a wrestling hold. It could be a headlock or a collar tie hold, but whatever the maneuver they are face to face holding fast to one another. The longer you look at it the more it seems as if they are not really wrestling but embracing. If you keep looking at it, you begin to feel as if they are about to kiss.^{vii} The Hebrew word translated here as “wrestle” can also mean “embrace.”^{viii} There is an intimacy here that speaks of not just a contest of strength but also of love. The sculpture reveals that wrestling with God is an act of love. It may feel adversarial, but it is actually an act of love, as we hold on to what we believe and whom we believe in, even when it seems against our better judgment.

Jacob declares that he has seen the face of God and lived, implying that seeing the face of God means death to the one seeing it, but as Frederick Buechner writes, “there is something more terrible than the face of death—the face of love.” He goes on to say:

God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy, because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything, before giving us life, he demands our lives—ourselves, our wills, our treasure.ⁱ

The trickster and deceiver receives mercy, not because he deserves it, but because God is merciful. Each of us, if we are honest, must admit to our own tricks and deceit, but we should also take heart, that just as God showed grace to Jacob, God shows mercy to us.

I believe that Jacob’s encounter with God reveals that it is not only alright to struggle with God, but it seems to be what God wants. Our struggles to hang on to God in the midst of our suffering and troubles may offer us new sources of strength as we shed our delusions of really being in control of the universe around us. It can also be an act of devotion to a God that we have encountered and learned to love and whom we simply cannot let go of.

Jacob is blessed by God, but he is also wounded. He walks away from the contest limping. Our own struggles in faith may leave us limping. We remain wounded from our fears, doubts, pain that does not go away—both spiritually and physically. This passage implies that somehow the wounding and the blessing are connected. Our woundedness can reveal to us more of who God is, who we are and our place in this world. Our wounds can be a pathway to both being blessed and being a blessing to others.

Roberta Hestenes, president of Eastern College, tells about her own experience of woundedness when she worked in a relief camp for famine victims. She was brought there to help the relief workers and the people of that area work together. Before going, she told herself that she would not get emotionally involved in the suffering she would see. She would keep it together in order to be of the most help. After a little time in the camp, she walked past the bodies stacked up like wood, and she held a child whom she assumed was about a year and a half old. The child turned out to be five years old but was so malnourished he or she looked like a toddler. She wept over the child and could not stop.

She wondered how her breakdown would be perceived. What help could she offer, this woman from America who loses control and is so weak? What could she bring, this woman who questions God? The next day as she sat in a meeting of relief workers and tribal leaders, one of the latter stood to introduce her and said, “This is our sister. Yesterday she wept for one of our children.” She realized that her weeping had not excluded her from the conversation on how to help; rather it was what enabled her to have a seat at the table in the first place^x.

So, we walk away limping from our wrestling with God, blessed and wounded, but still holding on. Amen.

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ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 268.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), 12.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ John A. Sanford, *The Man Who Wrestled With God: Light from the Old Testament on the Psychology of Individuation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 41.
- ^{iv} Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Ed. Betty Flowers, et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 296.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 298.
- ^{vi} Samuel Balentine, "Enthroned on the Praises and Laments of Israel," in *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, ed. Daniel Migliore (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 21-35.
- ^{vii} Bill Moyers, *Genesis*, 303.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 299.
- ^{ix} Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 18.
- ^x Bill Moyers, *Genesis*,