

“Wrestling”
Text: Genesis 32:22-31
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Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. Genesis 32:24

My husband's grandfather was a man who studied books and wrote them too. Ordained a Methodist minister, he demitted, that is, left the ministry, some years into it, after he came to the conclusion that the apostle Paul had forsaken the true gospel; and, therefore, he could no longer honor his vow to teach and preach the whole Bible as the Word of God. He was an odd man. There were several odd things about this distinguished scholar, professor and owner of the print shop that did all the work for Emory University. One of those odd things was that his grandchildren called him *Dadoo*. That would be sort of like calling the magnificent American bald eagle *Pretty Birdie*. *Dadoo* did not fit. Another odd thing about him was that late in life, he discovered wrestling on television and spent many a night watching matches between opponents whose very names were intended to strike fear in the heart of mortals: Andre the Giant, The Juicer, The Beast – Dr. Neff loved them all. He died over 40 years ago, and I doubt that he would have pursued his interest in wrestling, were he alive today, in this era of drug abuse and over-the-top violence. But when he was alive, he loved the combat. I wonder now if the reason was not a quirk in his quiet personality, but that he knew the Bible so well. He had read it from cover to cover and taught it to others. He knew all the stories the Bible has to tell, not just the sweet and hopeful ones, but the ones that describe struggles unto death. If you read the whole thing, you will find the Bible is loaded with tales of lust and power, schemes of conquest, and just about every pathology that has ever been acted out in the intimacy of families or in the annals of history.

Today's text describes a wrestling match that lies deep in the heart of the faith tradition we call our own. Fredrick Buechner describes this wrestling match as “an ancient, jagged-edged story, dangerous and crude as a stone knife.” (1) One of the combatants is a mysterious unnamed stranger who jumps his opponent from behind, in the dark of the night. In the other corner, so to speak, is someone who begins the match with the name Jacob, but who will have another name by the time morning dawns.

In the church, we often speak about the great heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Scripture: Moses, the liberator of the people; David, the great king; Abraham and Sarah, matriarch and patriarch who left their home to go to a new land, where God had promised to make them a great nation. We hear these names; they are familiar to us, but when I say the name “Jacob,” what comes to mind? It is hard to remember what his story is, and yet he just might be the most pivotal figure in the entire Old Testament. Who was he? The son of Isaac and Rebekah, the twin brother of Esau, grandson of Sarah and Abraham, the father of Joseph and his 11 brothers, leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. How about that for family connections!

Who was he? He was a fighter. Even before his exit from his mother's womb, he was a fighter. In fact, Rebekah was so troubled by the babies about to be born churning around inside her that she complained to the Lord about it. The Lord answered, "Two nations are in your womb and two peoples born of you shall be divided..." (Genesis 25:23) I can't imagine how news like that would be of comfort to a mother-to-be, but that's what God had to say. And so it came to pass that the babies were born. The first to appear was Esau, whom the Genesis writer describes as being a red and hairy baby, the kind of kid only a mother could love at first sight. And then comes the other twin, gripping at his brother's heel. I guess they were short on names back then, because there's not much imagination in the names the twins were given. "Esau" means "red" and the Hebrew term for hairy is se'ar, which, they tell me, sounds like Esau. That's a real stretch – Esau and se'ar sound nothing alike to me, but then I'm pronouncing my Hebrew with a southern accent. The name "Jacob" is derived from the word for "heel," which of course refers to his being born holding on to his brother's heel, but which so aptly describes what Jacob was. Most of his life, Jacob was a heel.

It might have been that Esau's mother loved Esau at first sight, but soon, she turned her affections toward Jacob, and he became her favorite. Remember Tommy and Dickey Smothers? One of them said regularly, "Mom always liked you best." We all laughed, because this business of siblings being rivals for their parents' affection is as old as Esau and Jacob.

Here is how the story evolves. When Isaac, the father of the boys, was old and had lost his sight, he sat one day alone in his tent, waiting for his elder son to appear so that he could give him the blessing that comes with the birthright of the older child. In the world of this story, the words of blessing were more powerful than armies. They bestowed not only material wealth, but also the heritage and authority that came from the Lord that blessed Abraham and Sarah and then Isaac, and now is, by all rights, supposed to fall on Esau. Once the words of blessing are uttered, they can never be taken back. (2) But it is not Esau who enters the tent of his blind father. It is Jacob, dressed up in the skin of kid goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck, so that his father would feel his skin and smell what he smelled like and think he was his brother. He brought game as Esau the hunter would have brought and bread his conniving mother had prepared. Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

"Come near that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are my son Esau or not."

Twice, Jacob flatly lies about it. "I am Esau," he says.

So the father, smelling his garments, blessed him, and said,
"May God give you the dew of heaven
and the fatness of the earth
and plenty of grain and wine.
And may the people serve you,
and the nations bow down before you,
and may you be Lord over your brothers,
and cursed be any one who curses you.
And blessed be everyone who blesses you. . ."

Isaac had barely gotten the blessing out of his mouth when the real Esau came in from hunting. Yes it's true, a long time before Esau had foolishly made a deal with Jacob. They had been out in the fields, and Esau was famished from hunting. He smelled the stew his brother was cooking, and he made a deal: his birthright for a pot of stew. But years had passed, and only the action of the father could actually confirm either son as heir. Clearly, Isaac meant for Esau, the elder, to have the blessing, but he was tricked by his younger son into doing what he had not intended to do. It was an ugly thing, an elderly man, blind, near death, betrayed by his own son.

You might expect that Jacob would be condemned, written out of the family, cursed by God, and banished into outer darkness, but none of that actually happens. Jacob is simply sent away to his Uncle Laban's place in the hill country. On the way, he had that famous dream, where the angels of God ascend and descend on the ladder standing on the earth and reaching up to the heavens." In the dream the Lord bestows upon Jacob a promise that makes the one made to Abraham seem like peanuts. "I'm going to give you the Promised Land and the land you are lying on, and I'm going to give it all to you and your offspring. And your offspring shall be as many as the dust of the earth. You shall spread abroad to the west and east and north and south, and I will never desert you. Wherever you go, I will be with you." (Genesis 28:13-15.) Not a word of condemnation, no prison sentence, only blessing, only promise, only the assurance that Jacob will never walk alone. Jacob, the scoundrel, will never walk alone.

He wakes up the next morning, continues his journey to the place of exile, where he remains long enough to accumulate a number of wives, a passel of children, and great wealth of his own, some of it as the result of his conniving against his uncle.

What's the lesson here? Is it that God loves liars and con artists? Well yes, that is the lesson, along with the fact that God loves all people, "not because of who they are, but because of who God is." (3) God operates on the basis of divine grace and not on the basis of human worthiness. This extreme story makes the point in the extreme. Who, after all, is really worthy?

A few moments ago we confessed together that we had done things we ought not to have done and have left undone things that we ought to have done. God loves and uses all people, the good, the bad, the ugly - all of us are somehow folded into God's plan of redemption, not because we are good, but because God is good and God has a purpose, of which we are all a part.

What about this business of God's plan for the salvation of all the families of the earth? Here's the truth: if God had to sit around and wait for perfect people to get the job done, the Almighty would still be waiting. This fall, I am going to preach a sermon entitled "Does Character Matter?" The answer is, "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes". But listen, grace matters more. When God has a job to be done, being the person who can do it just might trump being pure and holy. What was it Jesus said at the conclusion of his parable about the dishonest manager who was really and truly dishonest? ...*For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their generation than are the*

children of light. (Luke 16:8) In another place he counsels his disciples to be *wise as serpents and innocent as doves.* (Matthew 10:16)

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim writes this of Jacob: "He stands with qualities negative and positive, clear and ambiguous, simple and complex. Take him or leave him. But the most astounding thing about this story is that God takes him." (4) The unworthy and the worthy about Jacob come in one package. God takes him. God uses him. God loves him. God is not done with him.

When things have settled down, Jacob decides to return to Canaan and make peace with his brother. You've heard the story - how he sent everyone and everything ahead of him. Some think it was to check it out to see if his brother was still angry. If so, Esau would attack his family and he would escape. I don't think even Jacob would sink that low. Maybe he just wanted a night alone to get his head together. Sometimes, we can do that only by ourselves.

When he is alone in the dark, he is pounced upon by the stranger with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Night passes, the conflict continues, and as the sun slips up over the horizon, no one has been declared the winner. The stranger has been holding back but at the last summons his power and strikes Jacob on the hip, putting it out of joint. He then says to Jacob, "Let me go for day is breaking."

Jacob answers, "No. I will not let you go until you bless me."

The stranger does as Jacob asks: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and you have prevailed." The stranger, who never reveals his own name, blesses Jacob with a new name. Jacob believes that it is none other than Almighty God with whom he has wrestled and struggled. He emerges from that contest, transformed. He is not perfect. He is not pure, but he is purified. Now, he is ready to ask and receive his brother's forgiveness, ready to be the father of God's chosen people. He is humbled, but not humiliated. He knows now that he is God's *servant* rather than God's equal, because only God directs the course of history, and only God has the power to change it. Jacob could do a lot of things, but he could not make God's love come his way. God gives that love and along with it a new way of being in the world, only as a gift. Buechner calls the stranger in this story "the Beloved Enemy", the One who "before giving us life demands our lives."

"The final enigma of history," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "is not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteous in the righteous is to be overcome."

There is no more faithful prayer for any of us to pray than to say "Lord, don't let me go until you have been merciful to me, a sinner." We can trust God to know the details of what we need, because usually we are utterly unaware of what it is that separates us from God and from one another.

Randy Pausch is the courageous Carnegie Mellon professor who lost his battle with cancer last week. He became famous in recent months because of his last lecture, in

which he ruminated on life and what really matters. Over 10 million people have watched the video of that last lecture on You Tube so far. At one point, he talks about how low he was one day when he was a younger person. His football coach had ridden him unmercifully throughout the entire practice. He complained about it to his friend but his friend said, "Be thankful the coach rode you so hard. When no one says anything to you, that means they have given up on you." The stranger had not given up on Jacob. He wrestled with him all night long. You see Jacob limping against the horizon where the sun is rising, a new man, wounded, but ironically, whole for the first time in his life. You think of Jesus limping beneath the weight of the cross, as the sky darkens on his way to die for sinners, that all of us might get a new start.

I close with a prayer from the Iona Community off the coast of Scotland:
Christ, the Master Carpenter, who at the last, through wood and nails, purchased our whole salvation, wield well your tools in the workshop of your word, so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench, may there be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand. We ask it for your own name's sake. Amen

(1) Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, The Seabury Press, 1966, pp.10-18.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, Harper & Row, 1979, p. 58.

(4) *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.1, Abingdon, 1994, p.516.