

I am pretty much convinced that no one can quite bring out the best or the worst in a person like their family. Siblings, I think, can do this more than anyone.

If you have brothers or sisters, you probably know what I mean. And if you are an only child, well, you've probably found folks who can do this for you in the same way. When I think of my own family dynamics, we all get along fine, but it doesn't take much to plunge us quickly back into adolescence.

I was in college when my grandmother became terminally ill and ultimately bedridden for many years. In order to keep her company we would go over on Sundays some of the time and sit in her living room with her and watch First Presbyterian Church on t.v. My sister and I would be sitting on the sofa, bored out of our minds and and I remember being absolutely compelled to lightly flick at her exposed knee. Being a youngest child, she of course was incapable of simply letting this be. She would poke me back.

This would go on for an hour, I know this because First Presbyterian Church only had an hour on TV. And when the hour was over, when it was all over but the limping, our legs looked like we'd been in a motorcycle accident from all from all the bruises from mauling each other continually because she was unable to let it go, and I couldn't resist further provocation.

Lest you think that I pick only on my younger sister, I may as well own up that my older brother also got it. (Not my oldest brother the marine-turned-cop, or my younger brother who is six inches taller than me and was a triple letter athlete - I'm no fool, after all.)

But Brent, my older brother, was always such an easy target. And a fun target, because

he would try at first to resist being drawn into open conflict. It always started the same way at Christmas break, a “gentle” shove, designed clearly to indicate that we were about to throw down, which he would ignore. Brent is now an emergency physician and has pretty cool head, but I learned years ago that even he could be brought to a boiling point with enough picking. Invariably it transpired the same way, he would throw down whatever he was working on, and jump up and it was on. And then what proceeded was not a pretty picture: the medical student and the divinity student locked in a battle of wills rolling around on the floor of my parent’s house, locked in mortal combat. (Allow me to interject here that we no longer do this.) The problem that marked each one of these wrestling matches is this: Brent is taller than me, but I was heavier and stronger than him, and this made for an even match. Throw into this potent mix an enormous dose of sibling rivalry, and two individuals as stubborn as pit-bulls, and we would remain at a purple-faced stalemate indefinitely. Indefinitely, that is, until Brent would decide to play dirty. Then, like Jacob struck on the hip, I would end up holding on for dear life, or at least for sibling bragging rights until round two started.

Sibling bragging rights would be territory with which Jacob would be well familiar. Jacob stole his brother Esau’s bragging rights time and time again. You may know the story – of how Jacob tricked and doubled crossed his older brother until Esau was breathing murder and Jacob had to go on the lam. It is a story of family dynamics run amok that makes the most dysfunctional of families look like a Normal Rockwell painting. It is a story of brothers and vanity and violence. On and on the story goes until we reach this story about Jacob and the wrestling match that only he could face.

It is a match of epic proportions. It is Jacob and someone whose face we never see, whose identity is kept from us. Jacob never even knows with whom he has wrestled all night. It's fascinating the way Jacob morphs through the course of the story, going from an scrawny house-bound schemer in Canaan to growing up fast as he runs for his life, and somehow in the course of the trip he gains the strength of Hercules as he rolls back the stone from the well so that Rachel, with whom he was smitten from the moment he saw her, can water the sheep. And in the course of twenty years in his uncle's house, Jacob has learned a thing or two. The trickster has been duped and learned, has schemed and conquered and gotten his way. He has become wealthy, but he is still Jacob, still the one who steals and supplants, who has railed against his fate of playing the younger son and refused to play it. But finally, even in his uncle's house, Jacob wears out his welcome, and he must flee again, and God directs him that he is to return to Canaan, that it is time to face up to his brother and right the wrong that he has done him. So Jacob goes.

He sets his wives on camels and takes with him his flocks and the wealth he has gained through out-foxing his crooked uncle, and heads back toward the land he fled. And as he goes it all begins to flood back to him. As he nears his home, the landscape becomes familiar...there is the grove of oaks where he and Esau used to play when they ventured over the river their mother forbade them to pass...Esau, once his playmate, always his competitor, now his nemesis. Esau whom he has tricked, Esau from whom he has stolen. Images come back to haunt him, all of the wrongs he has done. Perhaps he has grown, surely he is older, but the years have held too much duplicity, too much water has gone under the bridge...the time has come to make things right with Esau, but before that, there must be this wrestling match.

Jacob must wrestle because he is afraid. He is afraid of Esau, afraid of what may happen. He must wrestle because he has done wrong and he knows it. But at its heart, this wrestling match is less about Jacob's wrongdoing and Esau's anger than it is about who Jacob must become. We do not know the identity of the opponent, but Walter Brueggemann writes that it is probably God, and if it be God, then there is much more to this wrestling match than meets the eye. Before Jacob can meet Esau, he must meet God, and it is the unknown of God Jacob must wrestle. This is God whose face cannot be seen, God in the full terror of mystery.

And remarkably, Jacob wrestles with this unknown all night long. Gone is the weakling child, replaced instead with the man whose strength enables him to endure the night.

Here we see glimpses of the man Jacob has become, the strength that he gained in love and in maturity. He wrestles all night long, seeming for a moment to have gained the upper hand, seeming another moment to be losing. Gaining and losing and gaining strength again until the unknown strikes him on the hip. But even still, even limping, Jacob will not let go and the wrestler asks him to let him go. Thinking himself strong he asks for a blessing. We have known Jacob his whole life long to seek blessings, often and usually, the blessings that are not his. Perhaps he seeking here that his wealth would increase, or that he might be given more sons, it is unclear, and he is not given the blessing, not yet. Not what he asks, at least.

Then the tables turn again, and the unknown wrestler asks his name. It is Jacob. True enough. Jacob it is, Jacob, which means heel grabber, supplanter, over-reacher, trickster. All true, all Jacob, but not flattering. As the wrestling match is coming toward its end, the unknown wrestler tells Jacob that he has a new name, no longer will he be Jacob with

all his history and hurt, no more can he be the grasping man who trusted no one, but now, he must become Israel, meaning, God Rules, or God preserves, because he has striven with God and humans and prevailed. But still he has not given him the blessing. And Jacob holds on for dear life. He has not held on all night for nothing, his hip is out of joint, his strength is spent, and he has not yet gotten what he wants, this all-important blessing from this mysterious stranger. Finally he asks the unknown wrestler, what is your name? And then he blessed him.

He blessed him and he departed. And Jacob called the place Penuel, the face of God. And Israel went on his way, limping.

Some blessings come easily. Some are readily apparent. Some, though, do not.

Sometimes we must wrestle all night long in order to see a blessing. Sometimes the wrestling will leave us limping. And we may not even then know what the blessing will be.

I don't know if we ever really stop wrestling with the past, wrestling as Jacob was with what he had been and what he had done, and who he would be. And I don't even know that Jacob's wrestling match was really as simple as that, as simple as wrestling with the past. It was a match of epic proportions: here was a man who had striven with God and prevailed! This mere mortal struggled in a death-grip with God and held on. This, therefore, is no ordinary wrestling match and this is no ordinary man. This is a bigger story because it is a story in which God is involved. It becomes a common story, a small story if we make it about Jacob and his little wrestling match. It is epic only in that it is God who can give blessings and it is God who can change names and create newness where before there was only oldness and betrayal and pain. Jacob wrestled all night but

even in the wrestling he could not force the blessing. He had to wait. When the time was right, then he was blessed.

But he went on his way limping.

As I've thought of this story, of the wrestling and the blessing and the limping, I have been unable to separate it from another image in my mind. This is my image, my past, but I wonder sometimes if it is not a communal experience, one which we have all shared at some point in our lives. I had a classmate at Princeton Seminary who entered the program knowing he had lymphoma. He might live, he might not, he didn't know. He just felt a calling from God to be there at that time, and so he followed that calling. His name was Buck, and he died just a few weeks before we graduated.

One of my seminary classmates once remarked that he went to seminary thinking it would be just like church camp but with Ph.D. teachers and communion rather than with lay-folks and goldfish. And the longer he was there, he said, the more he wanted the lay-folks and goldfish. Seminaries can be places of great doubt and testing as old doctrines are examined and put under the scrutiny of academic rigor. Frankly, it's tough at times. But when we had his memorial service, the preacher said we had come together to wrestle with God mightily in order that we might find a blessing. She said, it only looks like w'ere having a funeral, but what we were really doing was wrestling with God to see if there could be a blessing. I remember when one of my classmates sang Buck's favorite hymn, *He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought*, and he came to the verse that read *Lord, I would clasp thy hand in mine, nor ever murmur nor repine*. It's uncanny how much clasping God's hand can seem like holding on for dear life while trying to wrestle a blessing from the unknown. We had come to the end of our time together – we knew we

were supposed to be experiencing great joy as we accepted new calls and started ministries in new cities and yet, with this friend's death something felt terribly wrong – like joy was wrong and at gut level I think the blessing we were seeking was God's redemption of the world from sin and death. When I look back on it, when I remember those months, I can't separate them from that. That's the limp.

It was a wrestling match, to be sure, but the funny thing about it is now when I look back on it, with more than a decade of distance, I'm not sure at all that God wasn't on the same side with us.

That is the funny thing about blessings. It something of a rare thing to see them in real-time. Sometimes it takes time and distance.

And through that time and distance, God works on us. Because, that's the business God is in, after all, the redemption business. Names can change. New futures can be written. God never stops, no matter if we wrestle all night long, God never stops.

Let me tell you quickly how Jacob's story ends.

You know the backdrop: Jacob stole his brother's inheritance and ran away and when he returned he was so weaponized and ready for battle that he split his household into two camps to minimize the carnage when Esau found him.

When the day of reckoning came, Jacob looked up and Esau was coming at him with 400 men.

And then he stopped.

Families bring out the best and the worst in us. Some of us have to wrestle hard, and will carry the limp all the rest of our lives. And some of us get our limp some other way but

we still have to find peace. Whatever it is, when the blessings come, it is the grace of God.

He ran to Jacob, his brother and grabbed him, embraced him, and wept.

And Jacob, who wrestled all night with the unknown, who faced the full terror and mystery of God in all of God's redemptive, creative, terrible might; Jacob, for whom it was all over but the limping said to Esau, "It is as though I have seen God's face, because you have shown me such grace."

Where is the gospel in this old story of family feuding come around right? Where is the gospel in this story of wrestling and reaching, grasping and letting go?

The Gospel is that there is nothing God cannot redeem.

There is nothing God cannot redeem, and there is no limit to God's grace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.