

Rassalin'
Genesis 32.22-31
First Church of Christ, Congregational in Farmington, Connecticut
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Genesis 32.22-31

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man[□] said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,[□] for you have striven with God and with humans,[□] and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel,[□] saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.



I.

When I worry about the church, and I do worry about the church (sometimes I think that is part of my job description!), what I mostly worry is that there is not more wrestling in the church.

I'm not talking about that stuff you see on television—the WCW Nitro Monday Night or whatever they call it. When I was a kid we used to call that “rassalin’.” Haystack Calhoun, the Undertaker, Rick Flare—the Nature Boy, Hulk Hogan—as kids we had great fun watching them, even sometimes imitating the stunts they pulled.

The pile driver, full body slams, airplane spins—you have to love it.

And some of the “rassalers” have gotten a lot of publicity over the years. Jesse “The Body” Ventura was even elected governor of Minnesota. And one of the founders of the huge wrestling entertainment industry, Linda McMahon, is running for a United States Senate seat right here in Connecticut—now there might be a rasslin’ match.

There's plenty of “rassalin’” in the church too, I'm afraid, unimportant arguments, major disputes over minor points. It's just that it's not really wrestling.

A number of years and an even greater number of pounds ago, I was a high school wrestler—119 pound weight division. A wrestling match lasted exactly six minutes (if no one got pinned). It was the longest six minutes of my life. Real wrestling is a struggle from beginning to end requiring strategy, stamina and strength. There was nothing staged or phony about it.

I worry that there is not more wrestling in the church.

Wrestling with whom or with what, you might ask. That is a good question, but, as we learn in this story of Jacob’s wrestling, not an easy one to answer.

II.

Jacob was a shady character, but became the recipient of God’s promise. And when it happened, it came as a surprise, even to Jacob.

Twenty years have passed between the time Jacob first received God’s promise and the wrestling match we read about this morning. There is a long buildup to the story of Jacob’s wrestling. But the long and the short of it is that Jacob, whose name literally means, “heel,” had been a rassler all his life. Trickery, shady deals, running away...he had lived up to his name: the heel—now there is a name for a rassler—Jacob the Heel. In an ultimate act of deception he had stolen the blessing intended for his twin brother, Esau.

I wish that I could say that receiving God’s promise 20 years ago had changed Jacob the Heel, but it did not. He remained the same shyster who once bought his twin brother’s birthright for a bowl of soup, and cheated him out of his father’s blessing. And Esau had not forgotten his double-crossing brother.

Esau was looking for Jacob. And he found him. Jacob’s immediate response is military prudence: form two companies—a security measure. Then he prays, oddly enough, for the first time since that night 20 years earlier when he had a strange dream of a ladder that reached into heaven.

Now it is night, out on the boundary between home and nowhere. Jacob is alone. There Jacob wrestles with a dark stranger. The Bible says only “a man wrestled with him until daybreak,” nothing more. In Hebrew the word is *איש*, man. The Midrash, an early Jewish commentary on the scripture, suggests the man is an angel; Jacob clearly thinks it is God. But truthfully we are not told even that much. It is ambiguous. The nocturnal antagonist gives no name and we never see his face. But by the next dawn Jacob is convinced that he has fought with God.

Herein we discover yet another face of God: God the wrestler. This is not the subtle God of graciousness who once blessed Jacob in a dream. This is the terrifying God of unexpected (maybe unwanted) grace who comes in the middle of the night, a God who shall not be explained away in a mild sermon, or appeased by flowery prayers, who will fit in a church-sized box of our construction. This is a God who lives in the chaos, the wrestling.

The fight lasted all night. It was almost an even match, neither wrestler prevailed.

Near dawn, gasping for breath, exhausted in conflict, they are reduced to speech. “Let me go, day is breaking,” says the Ψ .

“Bless me first,” replies Jacob.

“Well, what’s your name?” asks the stranger.

“Jacob.”

“You are no longer Jacob.” (Remember Jacob it was really “Jacob the Heel.”) “You are Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

“So what’s *your* name? (Jacob was never satisfied.)

There was no reply.

III.

Jacob did not get a clear victory that night, or an answer to his most important question, “Who are you?” What he got was a new name, *a new identity through his struggle with God*.

And what’s more, Jacob came away from the struggle with a wound, one that never completely healed, a limp that served as a constant reminder of the struggle that led to a blessing. “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 . . . The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.”

I believe this to be a story of grace—but not grace as we usually think of it. This is not sweet Amazing Grace. It is tough, struggling grace, but no less amazing. The mysterious wrestler does not consult Jacob about who he wants to be. When daylight comes, the wrestling God is gone. But so is Jacob. In the morning only Israel remains, walking with a permanent limp after a night of wrestling. Israel, both wounded and blessed.

Wounded *and* blessed! God does not promise a struggle free life. That is not the way of the world God made. The world is filled with tragedy and sadness. This morning’s paper contains enough bad news to make me want to stay in bed and pull the covers over my head.

But in the midst of the struggle, as the dawn breaks, there is a blessing for us. When we struggle with God, refuse to let God go, the outcome is assured as surely as it is in a rassalin’ match. *We will have a new identity, a new name.*

And that is why I’m worried about the church. In order for us to make a difference, to follow God’s call into this new century, we need a new identity, a new name. Getting that name

means doing some wrestling. Do we have a strategy? Do we have the strength? Do we have the stamina? Can we live with the wound such a struggle may leave with us?

IV.

One of the reasons I'm here this morning is that I work for you, on the staff of your Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ. That means more to some of you than to others, but part of my ministry is to walk with pastors and churches who are in the midst of rasslin', and sometimes even through times of wrestling.

Obviously my relationship with this church is different from the other 240 or so congregations in the Connecticut Conference with whom I do ministry from time to time. I am proud to say that this is my church, my wife is one of your pastors, my children are growing up here among you and learning about the Christian faith with you and with your children.

And the truth is that being part of this church has given me some hope for the rest of the United Church of Christ, because we, as a congregation, have been in the midst of a very challenging wrestling match over the last 2 years. Yes, we've done some rasslin' too, but mostly we have been engaged in a tremendous wrestling match. And in that wrestling many of us participated in a long and thorough discernment process. Our congregation and its leaders have developed a strategy. Through months of surveys and long meetings and conversations we have shown that we have a lot of strength.

But do we have the stamina to see it through to the end?

Do we have the courage to live with the wound that may result by holding on in the midst of this struggle until the break of day?

Believe me, I understand very personally the ways that this struggle may change my life and the life of our church, but I'm convinced that we must stay in this wrestling match with God, stay with the fight to the end, even though it might mean walking away with a wound.

God is with us in this struggle.

And it's not that God wants to withhold the blessing from us, it's not that God wants to leave us with a wound, it's just that God knows the only way we can truly receive the blessing is by staying with the struggle to the end.

And you know, one temptation I always face, that we face is to take it all on at once, to try to pin the opponent with one huge, skilled move. But that is not the way a wrestling match usually works. In most wrestling matches it is those small moves, those tiny opportunities that we wait patiently for that make all the difference. Hard as it is, it won't all happen at once. It's our day to day faithfulness, our commitment to wrestle, to stay in the midst of the struggle that will bless us,

that will save us.

V.

When I was a kid growing up in a little church tucked way back in a hollow in the majestic blue ridges of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, every year the Woman’s Missionary Union would have a week of prayer for foreign missions, and we would hear stories about missionaries who put their lives on the line to dig wells or build hospitals or bring the gospel to the most remote and dangerous parts of the world. And I remember thinking it’s too bad you can’t be a Christian here in the North Carolina mountains. Nobody is persecuting or imprisoning or killing Christians here.

At the end of the week of prayer the pastor would ask if we were willing to give our lives to Jesus,

and I said, “I’ll give my life.”

And we sang, “I Will Arise and Go to Jesus,”

and I said “I will go.”

I pictured myself doing something huge like pulling a child out of a burning building or swimming out to save somebody who was drowning.

I imagined preaching Christ in the remotest part of the world and some soldier tying me to a stake surrounded by kerosene-soaked firewood and saying,

“One last chance. Deny Christ and you’ll live.”

But I would confess my faith and the soldier would strike a match, and my body would be engulfed in flames. The flags back home would fly at half mast, and the people would cry.

Later they would build a monument there and people would come with their cameras and say, “Jimmy, you stand over there where little Ronnie gave his life for Christ. Let me get your picture.”

But that’s not the way God works.

Oh, I was sincere then, as I am now. I will arise and go to Jesus, but nobody ever told me that it would happen in one great big act of discernment. What God needs from me are those little things, those little acts of faith, persistence in those little wrestling matches that I encounter every day.

God doesn’t need for me to do everything today.

God just needs for me to hold on, minute by minute, hour by hour, until the break of day. It’s just a few steps each day, this arising and going to Jesus.

That is the way our God. In the midst of the struggle, as the day breaks, there is a blessing for us:

a new identity,

a new name.

So please, my friends, if you want the blessing, the new name, limp and all, don't be afraid to wrestle with God.

And don't ever, don't ever let go of God, no matter how dark the night, or how hard the struggle,

don't ever let go...

don't ever let go...

for the day is breaking.