

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“In the Ring”

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Genesis 32: 22-31

22 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. 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 Peniel, limping because of his hip.

I never have been able to understand the attraction of so-called professional wrestling. I am not one who would be attending “Wrestlemania” or watching “WWE” or “Friday Night Raw” on television. I could identify the wrestlers of a few years ago: Hulk Hogan, the Macho Man, Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Undertaker, and Nature Boy Rick Flair but I just wasn't a fan. I attended a wrestling show at a local high school once. It was designed as a fundraiser so at least I felt good about giving some money to charity but I kept waiting to be hit with a folding chair during the entire show. I guess I have no real interest in watching people with artificially created big muscles throw each other around and out of the ring and then perform synchronized and well-rehearsed tumbling maneuvers. I guess I do not live vicariously through the entertainment driven good vs. evil rivalry that seems to be the foundation for every match and every wrestler.

I do not know much about amateur wrestling or what I would call “real” wrestling, either. You should be aware that we have some fine wrestlers right here at Meadowbrook Congregational Church. I know that the Gross and Sparling boys are excellent high school wrestlers and spend a great deal of time training and improving their wrestling skills. I have all the respect in the world for these guys. When I was in high school many years ago, the wrestling coach approached me about trying out for the team. He was looking for wrestlers in the lighter weight classes and at that time I weighed only about 125 pounds. That's hard to believe today! He told me that my legs were worth their weight in gold. I was flattered. I went to a couple of practices to check things out and just about died. My lungs burned and my heart wanted to leap out of my chest after about a minute of wrestling. I did not enjoy the sweaty physical one-on-one chess match. I made the wise decision not to try out for the team.

This morning's Scripture lesson is a description of a wrestling match. Jacob and apparently God are in the ring or on the mat together. I have always thought this to be an interesting description of a dialogue with the divine. Jacob isn't sitting quietly listening to God. Jacob isn't walking with God in a manner of faithful following. Jacob isn't praying waiting for

God to give him an answer. He is wrestling, grappling, struggling with God from sundown to sunrise.

Jacob's wrestling match occurs at an important point in his life. We explored a bit last week about how he lived the life of a scoundrel, taking advantage of people and situations to make himself more important. He is now on a journey, from the land of Laban his father-in-law from whom he has gained two wives and a certain amount of prosperity in sheep and goats and cattle. Jacob is heading home, to the place of his birth, where he must encounter his brother Esau, the brother from whom he has wrestled away birthright and blessings. He is fearful that his brother might extract revenge when they meet again.

Against this scene, Jacob settles down beside the road for a good night's sleep. During the night a stranger comes into Jacob's camp and the two engage in this all night wrestling match. Is it God? Is it an angel? Is it another person? Is Jacob wrestling with himself? All are real possibilities. But what is clear is that Jacob sees this wrestling match as a struggle with God. He says, "I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved." He is in the ring with God!

In his wrestling match, Jacob learned that God was always with him in his struggles. He was of the habit to try to deal with things by himself, to be self-sufficient, to control and manipulate everyone and everything around him. At that particular point in life, Jacob was avoiding conflict, running away from his problems. Sometimes we do the same. We ignore life's issues, hoping they will just go away. We don't want to take the energy and hard work it requires to deal with our situation honestly. We run and hide from others and from reality.

God wants us in the ring. When God picks a fight with us, God wants us to wrestle with life's circumstances honestly and thoughtfully. God wants us to deal with our created intention and the truth about ourselves. God wants us to understand that part of the human experience is wrestling with that whom we do not know, can't understand and can't control. God wants us to know that God is with us whenever we enter the ring in faith. Regardless of what we are up against, we are called by God and God is present.

Secondly, the story of Jacob's wrestling match teaches us that our struggles of life can be painful. Perhaps we tend to equate pain with failure but pain simply may be a humble reminder that some things in life cannot be controlled. There are just as many bruises as there are blessings.

Amy Laura Hall compares our desire for an orderly, stress free life to a Martha Stewart magazine. "When we consider the seamless beauty...the well-coifed guests, well-behaved children, the clean white tablecloths and clean people- it is easy to become bewildered by our comparatively soiled lives. Her prescription is clear. Find the right votive candle set, omelet recipe, shawl pattern, simple-yet-elegant hairdo, and life will become better. Trained to want a life that is well-ordered and efficient, a portrait worthy of her cover, we despair over the fragile, flawed, drooling, limping, but blessed lives that are our own." But it is the reality of our failure and weakness, and in the participation of the struggle, in the honest acknowledgement of pain that we encounter God face to face. Pain becomes the prelude to possibilities.

Finally, Jacob's wrestling match with the divine illustrates that our struggles with God have the power to transform us. Jacob limped away a changed man. He suddenly had new wisdom and courage and confidence to deal with uncertain situations ahead. He could now meet his brother face to face. He no longer expected hostility and needed to respond with evil. He expected grace and was willing to respond with a confession of his sin and a desire to receive forgiveness. God even changed his name. He was now to be called Israel, the one who strives with God. "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." This is not the proud voice of a scoundrel. This is the humble confession of an honest man who now seeks righteousness in life's stubborn problems.

In her book *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, Joan Chittister writes that particular passage of scripture reflects a spirituality of struggle. She says, "God is not a

puppeteer and God is not a magic act. God is the ground of our being, the energy of life, the goodness out of which all things are intended to grow to fullness. Yet it is a struggle. How can we possibly deal with the great erupting changes of life and come away more whole because of having been through them than we would possibly have been without them? To do that takes a spirituality of struggle.”

Our Scripture lesson didn't complete the story. There is an epilogue to the story. In the morning, Jacob, limping because of his wrestling match, went on to meet his brother Esau. He didn't know what he might encounter. He organized things carefully, putting his maids and their children in front, then Leah and her children, then Rachel with the beloved Joseph. But at least Jacob was courageous enough to place himself ahead of all of them. When he saw his brother, Esau ran to meet Jacob, embracing him and weeping. When Jacob offered half of all that he has as a gift for his brother, Esau was puzzled. Jacob replied, “I do this for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” You see, Jacob understood that whatever blessing he received or whatever understanding he was given from his experience “in the ring,” did not stand apart from what he would experience in life. In the end, Jacob learned that he could not earn God's favor or control the grace of God, he could only struggle with it. And in that struggle he would find the faith to trust in the presence of that grace no matter what might come his way.