

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Title: “We live. We love: Wrestling with God”

My Dad’s sister—my aunt—was flown by helicopter from Tawas to Saginaw last week for an emergency. She is the mother of six, grandmother to... I’ve lost track of how many grandchildren. She has also seen four of her grandson’s die. Four of her daughters have lost sons, and now one of the daughter’s husbands has stage four brain cancer. When one of those daughters—the cousin who lost her 23 year old son just a few months ago--posted the news of my aunt’s emergency helicopter flight, she followed the news with another post: “Haven’t we given enough?!” she wrote.

I haven’t talked to Tammy about what she meant but I think I can make an educated guess. My aunt’s family is tired of grieving the losses they’ve experienced. They are worn out, and her question wasn’t so much directed to those listening in on Facebook, but rather it was—like Lieutenant Dan clinging to the top of the mask on Forest Gump’s shrimp boat in the middle of a hurricane—a shout to God.

While it is true that we live and that we love—it’s what we do, there are times on our life journey when we live in the tension brought on by struggles. Sometimes life is a wrestling match and sometimes our opponent might seem to be God. How do we make sense of that?

There can be no better story to consider this question than Jacob’s story. While we sometimes gloss over the imperfections of biblical personalities because of their prominence in our faith story, Jacob was a scoundrel. He played on his dim witted brother’s foolishness and bought his birthright for a bowl of soup, which meant Jacob was then entitled to double the inheritance and would be considered the leader of the family once Isaac died. That wasn’t enough for Jacob. He also wanted his father’s death bed blessing, a sacred gift Isaac had intended for Esau. But no, Jacob had to have that too, and so he and his mother together conspired to deceive Isaac. Through that deliberate deception, Jacob received Isaac’s blessing.

Jacob is no lily white saint. He seems to care more about his own welfare, his own ascendancy, than he cares about family well-being or tradition. Jacob is a rule breaker, a self-focused, greedy individual who breaks several commandments long before, of course, Moses carried them down the mountain. And when Esau learns of his brother’s final treachery, he quite understandably threatens to take his life. Whether or not the threat was credible it’s not clear. How many times have you heard someone say they are so mad at so and so they want to kill

them? Sometimes it's just an expression of deep anger that leads to such statements. But sometimes—as we hear far too often after far too many shootings—people actually mean it.

So Jacob is threatened and chooses to run away. Rather than face his offenses face-to-face with his brother, he takes off. Once again, it's all about Jacob. He runs and spends the next twenty years or so living with his uncle Laban which is another story all its own. Suffice it to say that Jacob does well. In spite of his history and the way he treated his brother and disregarded the family unity and tradition, he becomes a wealthy man. He also has two wives and maids and children. At some point he decides it's time to go home again, to face his brother finally. Maybe he's getting to the age at which he recognizes that carrying around some of the internal baggage just isn't worth it. Maybe there are other reasons. Whatever the reason, God tells Jacob to go home.

And that is where we pick up the story :

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. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man[a] said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

As a high school wrestler I used to love this story. Still do. This rascal Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man who turns out to be God. Now wrestling is up close and personal. I mean this isn't a team sport. There is no ball or puck that captures the attention of the crowd. This isn't about team work in which the team that works together best is usually the winning team. This is one-on-one, face-to-face, one man against another grappling. It might be that Jacob is wrestling with God's directive to go home and face the music of the wrong he's done to his brother Esau. Jacob doesn't want to go or he's afraid to go and so he finds himself resisting. Maybe it's like having a sleepless night because some vexing problem or situation keeps us awake all night and try as we might we just can't shut down enough to sleep. The mind keeps churning and won't let go of the situation that keeps us awake. Or maybe it's the kind of preoccupation with some wrong that we just can't leave alone.

Elie Weisel, you might have heard, died yesterday. He was a holocaust survivor who agonized over the experiences through which he and others lived in the concentration camps in Germany. But maybe more than his own experiences, he agonized over those who did not live through it. His life was spent wrestling with the trauma of such hatred and dehumanizing of his fellow human beings. He vowed to live in order to keep the memory alive so others could not forget, lest we allow it to happen again. In doing so, he had his difficulties with God, so deeply that it might be said that his life was one long wrestling match with God. "Usually we say, 'God is right,' or 'God is just' — even during the Crusades we said that," he once observed. "But how

can you say that now, with one million children dead?” According to one article though, “Still, he never abandoned faith; indeed, he became more devout as the years passed, praying near his home or in Brooklyn’s Hasidic synagogues. On the airplane that was to take him to an Israel darkened by the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, he sat shoeless with a friend, and together they hummed Hasidic melodies. ‘If I have problems with God, why should I blame the Sabbath?’ he once said.”

Apparently, Jacob has problems with God as he wrestles through the night. And God is willing to engage him in his resistance. In fact, God is so willing that God seems to limit himself. If this is, in fact, God, shouldn’t God be able to simply toss Jacob aside once he’s ready to leave? But God doesn’t overpower Jacob. He meets Jacob at his own level and stays with him, tossing and turning, rolling in the dirt of the struggle. God isn’t hesitant to get dirty with Jacob.

When Josh was a little boy, I’d come home and because he had a father who used to wrestle and played at it with his son, he’d come running, “Dad, will you wrestle with me?” He loved it—and so did I. There was a closeness in it—an intimacy, a playfulness and joy in it.

I can’t help but wonder if there isn’t some of this in God’s approach to Jacob. Like a father who lives his son so deeply, a father who knows his son is not without fault, a father who recognizes that the son has some unresolved issues with his own brother that will stick with him and trouble him to the end of his days if he doesn’t face them--and him: I wonder if this wrestling God has such affection for his struggling son that he decides to spend time with him allowing Jacob to work out his angst or resistance or fear or whatever it is that keeps Jacob from being whole.

Have you spent time on the mat with God? Have you shouted protests to God, been angry with God, cried ‘why’ to God? Have you been challenged by God to grapple with a change or a direction God has given and decided to walk away rather than engage? People who take God seriously will wrestle. Life creates inevitable conflicts that make it so. In fact, one of the messages of this story is that conflict is part of life. It’s normal. If you read his story, Jacob was always struggling with someone.

So if God is challenging you to struggle with something—maybe whether taking a course in your life is right or wrong, take heart. Take off your dress shoes and get in position because grappling with God has a storied history. Take heart because though Jacob’s life was rough and tumble, God stuck with him. God still accepted him and lead him into the future.

Likewise God will stick with us and lead us into the future though our lives may be as rough and tumble as Jacob’s was. We are acceptable to God though we have our struggles, our questions, our dilemmas—even our shouting matches with God. Trusting that--experiencing that acceptance--brings the kind of joy I used to have when rolling on the carpet with my son when he was a little boy. In fact, I believe God wants to share such parental love with us and that Jesus’ life is the proof even beyond God the wrestler who took on his son Jacob on his way home. All we have to do is be willing to join the match.