

Sermon theme: Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-32

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Sunday, August 3, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I call your attention this morning to the “Brunch Bunch Questions” following the order of worship. We are fortunate that Junior McGarrahan, our Associate Pastor for Christian Formation and Discipleship, writes these every week. We provide them because, in our Reformed tradition, we expect that each one of us will have a Bible in our hands, read it, and ask questions about it and discuss it together, particularly as it relates to the sermon of Sunday morning. I call your attention to the 2nd question: Describe a time when something you were struggling with, in fact, became a wrestling match with God. And that is what we speak to this morning—when those things that seem ordinary conflicts and struggling issues in our life become wrestling matches with God.

Let us pray. O now, gracious God, may you meet us in our struggles of life; for we wrestle with you—to know you, in the person of Jesus Christ, by the power of your Spirit. May your Word now draw us in to who you are—in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jean Calvin said of this famed struggle between Jacob and God: “All the servants of God in this world are wrestlers because the Lord exercises them with various kinds of conflicts... God is an antagonist who descends into our arena to try our strength.” Jacob’s very name means “the one who grabs the heel,” remembering that Jacob wrestled with his brother even before he was born, and wrestled outside, as he was coming out of the womb. He contended with all members of his family. At this particular moment in his life, he is concerned because he is about to confront his brother, Esau. And if you remember, he defrauded Esau of his birthright and his father’s blessing; and Esau has sought to kill him. Jacob is struggling in fear of meeting his brother again. Will he take his life... or will God preserve him? His very combative nature ricocheted back on him in the sheep wars that he had with his father-in-law, Laban; in the competition between his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Jacob cheated his brother, so Laban cheated him. As Laban defrauded Jacob, so Jacob fleeced Laban. In everything Jacob did, his ambition drove him to compete and win; to struggle constantly for more. It seemed never to be enough. And so at this moment, God meets him on his own terms; God meets him in the struggle... in the competition... in the moment, to wrestle with the very man himself.

One night, after Jacob had sent all of his family and wealth away, he had this encounter with God. Have you been in a place where you are all alone? You have seemingly lost all things? You have sent all things away from yourself and you find yourself struggling with the very foundations of life? In fact, you find yourself wrestling with God. As Calvin so noted, “Jacob is the patriarch of every man and woman who has recognized, in the conflicts and the competitions of life, we are, at the very core, at the very heart of it all, embattled with God for our lives.” It seems that every human struggle is a potential prophetic sequel to the ancient and primal struggle that we go through with God. We even acknowledge this struggle in our church, where we have a Sunday School class by the name of “Wrestlers.” And what would Washington, D.C. be like without the ongoing struggle, the competition, and the debate? This is why we call this quadrennial struggle a presidential “race”—there will be a winner and there will be a loser.

So what are you struggling with in your life? Where is God showing up in the midst of your conflict? Some of us struggle here with our very purpose and identity. Some of us are embattled over life’s values and who will have the upper-hand on those values. Some of us are in competition for the upper-hand even in the church— even in this church. Some of us fight cancer. Others fend off depression. Teenagers struggle with independence; parents have a hard time letting go. College grads compete for too few jobs. Baby Boomers combat aging; and older adults fight for health. Nations struggle for land. Governments struggle for control. Leaders compete for votes. The oppressed cry out for justice. The powerful maneuver to keep their power. Everywhere we turn we see the conflict, the wrestling, and the struggle of humanity to make sense of all of it. Is it any wonder that this climactic event of the Jacobean strength resonates as a

romantic symbol of the herculean human task: struggling for life? God struggles with us. And we wrestle with God.

The American poet, Emily Dickinson, is often seen as an artistic protagonist of the struggling Puritan refugee— trying to throw off the captivity of religious and social bigotry. Early in her life, Dickinson began to see herself “standing alone in rebellion” against the “transcendent” understanding of God. She hungered for God who would come close, be intimate. And so she identified closely with Jacob wrestling with God. And she wrote the poem:

“A little East of Jordan, Evangelists record, A Gymnast and an Angel Did wrestle long and hard –

Till morning touching mountain – And Jacob, waxing strong, The Angel begged permission To breakfast – to return –

“Not so,” said cunning Jacob! "I will not let thee go Except thou bless me, Stranger!" To which acceded to –

Light swung the silver fleeces "Peniel" Hills beyond, And the bewildered Gymnast Found he had worsted God!"

She changes the perspective of the story a lot. She plays with the images and the facts; and in so doing, she herself is declaring that she is wrestling with the very God who created and gave us the biblical text. Dickinson experienced her personal struggle in life as a calling of a kind of ‘gymnastic poet’ who wrestles with God. Because she believed, deep in her heart, that God, in fact, had abandoned her to this earth, because she wrestled as a woman, a poet and an artist—venturing outside the pre-described box of theological acceptance. She was a woman struggling to find herself as fully human and gifted in a world where men were the ones who were to ascend and be rewarded. She would not go to church with her Puritan family, but would stay home, away from that tightly-framed Amherst congregation. She wanted “to look for God, alone— determined to confront the full barrenness of her human fate.”

She would struggle with this conundrum all of her life: “Is God a preserver or a destroyer?” Why did God set her up to be so gifted and so unable, in this culture, to use her gifts and be recognized for them? She felt that it was her troubled calling, as a woman poet, to coerce God’s blessing for herself, even though there were no mechanisms to give it to her. She too, like Jacob, was born in the shadow of a blessed brother, in a world where women should not... and dare not... ascend to the heroic archetypes to wrestle with God for public expression and recognition. So she wrestled with God by herself... and in her poetry... and demanded, through the cleverness of her critical poetic pen, the blessing that seemingly belonged to others.

Does it seem like, at times, that you are wrestling out there by yourself and there is nothing in the world’s system to support your struggle? You’re alone. There is no one who can understand you or help you fight the fight. It was Dickinson who found the weapons of her fight in pen and poetry. She discovered the arrows in words and the bullets in the verses. She was the poetic Gymnast who fought with God “long and hard.” And she hoped to become the “bewildered Gymnast” of her poem, who “worsted God”—maybe even fleeced God.

Do you feel, at times, as though you are called to be some kind of religious acrobat? Somehow, to have the right moves, and to plan the right holds, and to prepare the unexpected throws to be able to get your adversary on the mat? Do you find yourself in the midst of a cluster of exploding crises that are just too much? You are alone in the dark night, out in the middle of nowhere, struggling to make sense of what seems to be an immanent doom? And maybe you’re not even sure who the adversary is. It must have been shocking to Jacob to find out that the very Adversary he wrestled with was God himself!

Is it true that we have to somehow ‘beat’ God in order to gain a blessing? We’ve got to somehow trick God to give us that which God doesn’t really want to? But here in this text, who wins is very ambiguous. We know the struggle goes on; we know that it seems like Jacob prevails until dawn. But we also know that the angel has the last act in hurting Jacob at the very socket of his hip. Maybe it’s a draw. As Calvin said,

“Like Jacob, the Lord has created you to wrestle with God.” God wants you to invest everything you have in that struggle... in the inquiry...the investigation...the confrontation... the complaint... to seek God and know God—with all of your being, and all of your heart; with everything you have. And God comes down to you, to do battle. God does not expect you to climb up. The ultimate human objective is not the art of the struggle; but, in fact, it is the knowledge of the Holy One in the midst of the struggle. To wrestle with God is to know God— even alone in a dark night.

Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, kept a personal journal he called “Markings,” (events in his life). In 1950, at the age of 45, it was the apex of his public service in Sweden. After writing his spiritual reflections for 25 years, he entered a very difficult time of personal darkness; a ‘dark night of the soul’ that lasted for three years. On New Year’s Day in 1950, he wrote in big letters in this journal: NIGHT APPROACHES NOW. He followed these words about his extended time of suffering and wrestling with God with these statements:

“In a whirling fire of annihilation, In the storm of destruction The deadly cold of the act of sacrifice, You would welcome death.

But then it slowly grows within you, Day by day, you suffer anguish – Anguish under the unspoken judgment which hangs over your life While leaves fall in a fool’s paradise.”

And then the following New Year’s Day he wrote again: “Night Approaches Now.” And again in 1952 at the following New Year’s Day he wrote: “Night approaches now – How long the road is...” But then, on New Year’s Day 1953, just three months before he was elected to Secretary-General of the United Nations, there is a different mood in his writing: “For all that has been – thanks! To all that shall be – yes!” In three years of darkness, somehow he had secured the blessing of God. And what was that blessing? What was the core of the struggle? What was he looking for? He goes on to say this: “I don’t know who or what put the question to me. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer “Yes” to Someone or Something. And from that hour, I was certain that existence was meaningful, and therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. I came to a place and time when I realized the Way leads to triumph which is catastrophe, and catastrophe which is triumph; that the price for committing one’s life would be reproach, and the only elevation possible lies in the depth of humiliation...”

But then he goes on to say (and this is the heart of it) in his discovery in the middle of the struggle: “As I continued along that hard Way, I learned step-by-step, word-by-word, and behind every saying in the Gospels stands one Man... and one Man’s experience. And also, behind the prayer that the cup might pass from him as his promise to drink it... also behind each of the words from the cross;” he discovered Jesus, the Christ, in the midst of the struggle of life. And Jesus answered the depth issues of his life—even his concern about dying young. With that motivation he went on to serve the world—to be a mediator between nations and a reconciler between governments. He experienced, in the struggle, the face of God. And Jacob called that place Peniel, “the face of God.” As Jacob says, “I have seen God face-to-face;” Hammarskjöld said, “I have seen the face of Jesus.”

Yes, there are wounds that come out of those moments of struggle. Jacob walked out of that wrestling match with a limp. We do not escape these hard conversations and encounters with God without some scars and maybe even some nightmares. But the key of what happens in those engagements is simply that we meet God face-to-face. Why the struggle? Because that is the best place for us to wrestle with God; and frankly, if it wasn’t for the human struggle, we might ignore God completely. The struggle leads to intimacy with God, not abandonment by God. God will have the last word. And as Hammarskjöld discovered, that last word is about Jesus, whom he met face-to-face, who accomplished the struggle between humanity and God on the cross. It was his experience of Jesus’ suffering and giving his life that gave Hammarskjöld permission to see a life of sacrifice, and potentially giving his own life. Jesus Christ met him in the middle of the struggle.

Why are you going through difficult engagements and struggles and wrestlings? Because God wants to meet you there, in the midst of the pain of that. And when you discover Who is there with you—that Jesus has already paid the price and suffered on the cross—you know that you’ll be able to make it through

because he has already made it through.

And so we remember Jacob, the wrestling with God, and we know now the invitation to meet God face-to-face. And so we meet Jesus, the Christ; we listen to his voice; we have him come beside us, and he wrestles with life along with us. It is in the name of the God who loves us, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has poured out grace upon us to be with us, and the community of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live in the midst of the struggle— that we give ourselves today, to follow Jesus Christ; to meet God face-to-face.

Let us pray. O Lord Jesus, may you become real. May you be seen as alive, in full power before us, even in the midst of our darkest places. May you show us what it means to wrestle, even with God, and discover that God has blessed us in Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.