

Disciples Wrestle with God

Part 7 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Genesis 32:22-31

(off lectionary)

and delivered on

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at

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When I was a kid weekends had a rhythm and a routine. Sunday mornings meant Sunday School followed by church. Late afternoon brought Sunday dinner (always) pot roast, potatoes and carrots cooked in a slow cooker along with cottage cheese and bread and butter. That was a guarantee.

Saturdays were a bit different. Saturdays meant morning cartoons. Some of you may remember this but there were only a few television channels to choose from. In Peoria, there were four ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS (19-25-31-47). There was no cartoon network or Nickelodeon or Disney Channel. Except for about an hour on weekdays, cartoons were Saturday morning fare. In these pre-ESPN and Fox Sports days, early afternoon meant watching “Wide World of Sports” where I awaited “the thrill of victory (and) the agony of defeat.”

In between, though, in the late morning was pro-wrestling. I remember watching one of my idols, The Crusher (Reginald Lisowski), as he body slammed and elbow crushed his opponents in the ring. His exploits were the center of conversation among third and fourth grade boys on the recess playground. I wanted to be like him.

I did wrestle in high school. Well, I was on the wrestling team. I wrestled in the 116 and 123 pound wrestling class. Unlike the Crusher, I wasn’t very good. I spent a little too much time counting the lights, as it were. My 3-3 record consisted of three victories by forfeit and being pinned three times.

But it was a different sort of wrestling. Professional wrestling (and I know this will sound shocking) isn’t real. At least, it isn’t really wrestling. I don’t want to diminish the athleticism of pro wrestlers but their bouts are scripted. People cannot be routinely hit over the head with a folding chair one moment or pile driven into the floor while averting serious injury and then rise up to defeat their opponent. That’s the fare of pro wrestling: body slams, drop kicks, elbow slams and the like. Real wrestling is different.

Among the so called combat sports, it’s unique. In boxing and karate, one strikes the opponent. In Judo, one throws the opponent. Even in mixed martial arts, the exchange is dominated by blows to the other. Wrestling, on the other hand, requires holding onto your opponent. Yes, there’s a struggle, but the struggle is always together. Victory comes not by striking or injuring the opponent, but by engaging him attempting to expose his weaknesses as he does the same to you.

In that passage from Genesis that we heard from just moments ago, Jacob wrestled. He didn’t drive the man away or strike him. He held onto him and engaged the struggle.

Jacob was born for this moment. His name, Jacob, literally means “down in opposition to.” His father, Isaac picked that name because when he was born he came out holding on to the heel of his older twin, Esau. (Ge. 25:26) He entered the world wrestling. Until this moment, he’d not been a particularly stellar human being. He’d tricked his brother out of his birthright and his blessing. He’d run away lest his brother kill him. Although brilliant, he used his intelligence to manipulate his father-in-law and his livestock breeding to basically steal. Now at this moment, he’s abandoned his father-in-law with his wives and children. He’s heading home, and he doesn’t know what to expect from his brother, Esau. Will Esau send men to kill him? He sent his wives and children away to protect them.

Then, we are told, he wrestled with a man. He WRESTLED with a man – all night long. He grappled, he held on – not knowing who the man was – but (I think) suspecting that this was not some ordinary man. Maybe he thought it was his brother Esau or one of his men. This started at night when it wasn’t easy to see. But as the twilight of dawn approached, the man says, “Let me go.” Jacob refuses unless he received a blessing.

“What is your name?”

“Jacob” (that is he who opposes)

“Not anymore. Now you are Israel.” (one who strives with God.)

With that he received his blessing. And it changed him. Not only does he have a limp to remind him, but now, when he asked the man's name, he says, "Please" rather than a demand. Then, the next day, when he approaches his brother Esau he does so in humility and in repentance. So he marked that place and called it Penuel – the place where he met God face-to-face.

This wrestling match doesn't just lead to a change in Jacob's life, but it tells us something about God. And what it tells us is not that God can be defeated. Scripture tells us that "the man" asked for release "day (was) breaking." Which means what? It was about to get light. God isn't a vampire, so what would it have been, that led him to break it off at that point?

In Exodus 23:30 we hear God say, "no one shall see me and live." Moses saw his back and turned grey. This man – this theophany – God in human form – gave up the battle to spare Jacob from seeing his face. Then he blesses him. Jacob is transformed.

God didn't reject Jacob for wrestling with him. God didn't curse him for refusing to give in sooner. Instead, God blessed him. That's important.

I don't know if I've said it here, but this is the reason I'm a Methodist. When I was in fifth grade visiting my grandmother's Methodist church (the church where I would be confirmed and baptized – the church where I would preach my first sermon), I asked the Sunday School teacher a question (maybe as a bit of a smart aleck). It was something like, "If there was only Adam and Eve, where did Cain get his wife?" The answer is "in the land of Nod," but that's not what she said. She didn't cop out and tell me to ask the pastor. She didn't tell me to just "shut up and believe it" like I would have heard and had heard at the fundamentalist church that had been my experience up until then. Instead, she said (and I quote), "I don't know. But it's good to ask questions, because that's how your faith grows." At that moment, I decided that I was a Methodist.

God can handle our questions. God can handle our doubts. Faith isn't easy. This book (the Bible) is hard to fathom. It's easy to gloss over the parts that we don't like – that confuse – or frighten us. How many people haven't really read Revelation because it's scary, and so miss out the message of hope and promise it conveys? How many people avoid the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) because God seemed so mean instead of getting to see how consistent God has been in promise and mercy? All because we want it simple. All because we're afraid that God might reject us if we dare to wrestle with him and to try to score points with our own understanding.

Wrestling though isn't boxing or kickboxing in which we strike out but an event where we grapple together with God – holding on – as we strive to come out victorious. God wants us to have victory. God wants us to know his mercy and his grace. When we wrestle with the word of God revealed in Scripture we encounter the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ – whose face brings life not because he crushed his opponents, but because he engaged them.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. We're happy to remember that. He also ate with Pharisees and Sadducees. He didn't reject or abandon them. He challenged them to reconsider what they "knew" about Scripture and God. He pointed to passages and to places where they'd added extra rules trying to be faithful and asked them to rethink what they knew in the context of who God is: a God of promise and a God of mercy.

Maybe this isn't the best thing to say to keep my job, but as a pastor in a denomination that requires a master's degree for ordination, I don't always understand Scripture. There are parts that trouble me. There are parts that I wish were different. But I'm not the same guy who used to look through Scripture trying to find loopholes that would allow me to do what I want, because through wrestling – grappling – tangling with Scripture – I've come to discover God's

mercy in places that I wouldn't have expected. Now, I just trust that God might be smarter than me, so when we wrestle it's an opportunity for me to grow stronger, to get better trusting that rather than crushing me, that when we wrestle God will find a way to bless me.

Now I can yield to God, not in hope born out on that cross.

Disciples wrestle with God, not to be freed from his "oppressive" commands, but to grow stronger in faith so that we can claim the true freedom that comes through his love, his mercy, and his promise revealed in Jesus Christ. AMEN.