

Wrestling with Jesus

Genesis 32:22-31

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October 13, 2013

Jacob was about to meet his brother Esau. He hadn't seen him in 20 years, and the truth was that Jacob had robbed Esau of what he deserved as older brother. Jacob didn't know if his brother would kill him. He'd heard Esau was coming with 400 men. Jacob sent gifts ahead, then his family and all his possessions, to prepare the way. But Jacob was scared. And in the midst of this dysfunctional family situation, something happened.

Jacob is trying to sleep, there on the ground beside a stream. In the dark, someone jumps him. With all his strength, Jacob struggles against the stranger. He doesn't know who it is. Is it a demon from the river? Is it his brother Esau settling scores one-on-one? We the readers don't know who it is at this point, either. They wrestle in mortal combat all night long. It seems that the match is about even until the stranger reaches down to where the thigh joins the hip and dislocates that joint.

Jacob, wounded, still holds on. "I won't let you go," he says, unless — what? Unless you say "uncle"? No: "unless you bless me"! Do you say this to your enemy? To the one who attacks you in the night? But this is what Jacob had wanted, needed all his life: to be blessed. It was what his father denied him. And maybe Jacob intuitively senses something about the stranger, and has begun to understand that the one who finally has the power to bless is not his father or his brother but God.

The stranger replies with a question: "What is your name?" "Jacob"—which means grabber, supplanter. "No, from now on your name is *Israel*, which means "he struggles with God." Jacob demands: "Tell me *your* name." Who are you, really? But the stranger will not give his name. God's name is holy and beyond Jacob's understanding. But he does *bless* Jacob before he leaves.

Then Jacob says: "I'll call this place Peniel," which means the face of God, "because I saw God face to face." Oh, it *was* God! It was God who wrestled this rascal there and gave him a new name.

What are we to make of that story? It can be like a Rorschach test, one of those ink blots on which we project our own meaning. It's a favorite story precisely because its meaning is so unclear. But at *least* this story is saying this: the place where we encounter God can be a place of struggle.

We live in a day of religion lite and user-friendly churches. The encounter with God is assumed to be a warm fuzzy feeling. Church is supposed to be like a visit to a spa. Hollywood tells us nowadays that when God is speaking to you, you see the actor backlit with a soft lens, so that light shines all around, and strings play softly in the background. Here in Genesis we see a picture of relating to God that is very different.

This is a defining moment for the Jewish people. They are the nation of Israel—the people who wrestle with God. Not, I think, the people who once wrestled with God long ago, but people who are continually arguing with God, grabbing hold of him in awkward ways, trying to twist God's arm, and even in times of exile and genocide begging for a blessing.

That is our tradition as well, since we who are Gentiles have been grafted onto the Jewish family tree. We place ourselves under a Lord who although he was equal with God put himself in

our place as one who had to struggle with God, agonizing, sweating drops of blood as he asked his Father to change the plan—and yet in the end he submitted.

Christian tradition has also looked at this story as a story about our encounter with Jesus. Who was this person who jumped Jacob in the dark? He's been called an angel, and there are a lot of wonderful pictures of Jacob wrestling with an angel in the night. But Genesis actually says nothing of an angel. At first it's a man, and then it is revealed to be God. Christians sometimes say that the mysterious figure in the Old Testament called "the angel of the Lord" is an ancient way of talking about the second person of the Trinity before he was born as a human—that God sometimes appeared in human form, as he had appeared to Jacob's grandparents Abraham and Sarah. That's the idea behind Charles Wesley's powerful poem "Wrestling Jacob" [read before the sermon; it is sung in part as the hymn *Come O Thou Traveler Unknown*].

We encounter Jesus in our own lives sometimes as a traveler unknown, a mysterious force we wrestle with in the dark. Wesley imagines himself as another Jacob, wrestling Jesus without knowing who he is, demanding that he tell him his name. What the poem suggests is that we have to wrestle with Jesus before we can really know him. We are wrestling with an unknown God in the night, and it is only after struggle that God reveals his new name. The name "Jesus" is not revealed until the 12th stanza of the poem, but we learn before that that God's name is Love. "The morning breaks, the shadows flee, pure Universal Love thou art: to me, to all, thy mercies move—thy nature, and thy name is Love."

There's something in that which absolutely gets to me. Coming to know Jesus is so much more than "accepting" him or opening a door for him to come in. It's a struggle. We don't know at first if he's God or not—or a demon, or a projection of a brother or father, or some dark force of our own psyche. We don't know at first that he is love. We have to wrestle with him in the dark before we come to know that. And the intimacy we experience with Jesus is not the intimacy of a gentle massage or a snuggling child. We get to know him in a struggle against him. Jesus—God himself—wants us to struggle, to grow up by fighting him, as we define ourselves against God's strength. There is an intimacy in two men grappling with each other on a mat until they are exhausted, and that is the kind of intimacy we can have with Jesus.

A preacher from Iowa told a story a few years ago about a wrestling match between two high schools, Humboldt and Ogden [Nathan Aaseng, 2007, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2111>].

Humboldt had a senior on their team with Down syndrome. He was not capable of wrestling at a competitive level and posed no challenge at all to any wrestler. But the coaches asked if anyone on the Ogden team would at least give the boy a chance to get out on the mat.

An Ogden wrestler offered to take him on. He not only wrestled him for the entire six minutes, but allowed his opponent to beat him on points. He gave the Humboldt kid the thrill of not only competing, but of raising his arms in victory. Both wrestlers got a standing ovation, and there was hardly a dry eye in the gymnasium.

And for the first time, I understood what that Genesis story of a man wrestling with and prevailing against God was about. The unique message of Christianity is that God is not an impersonal force, or a terrifying presence to whom we cannot relate in any meaningful way. God is not a person who expects only praise and sacrifices and groveling from us and has no further use for us. God is ready and willing and eager to get down and dirty with us.

Of course God could squish us like a bug in a nanosecond. But for our benefit, God is always available to wrestle with us, at whatever level we are capable of wrestling. God sent Jesus into the world to wrestle with us, and Jesus allowed himself to get pinned to a cross. That's what it took for us to experience the love that flows from God.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a poem in German about 110 years ago [“The Man Watching”] which spoke of wrestling with the angel, and wrestling with God. This is the translation by Robert Bly, a friend of many on Block Island:

What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights us is so great!
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names.
When we win it’s with small things,
and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the Angel who appeared
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
when the wrestler’s sinews
grew long like metal strings,
he felt them under his fingers
like chords of deep music.
Whoever was beaten by this Angel
(who often simply declined the fight)
went away proud and strengthened
and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,
by constantly greater beings.