

“Wrestling a Blessing”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

September 22, 2019, Pentecost 15 NL

Genesis 32: 9-13, 22-30

Today, we have the story of a wrestling match between God and a human being—and God doesn’t win. As the saying goes, “The struggle is real.” The struggle is real between Jacob and God.

There are some big questions coming out of this story—questions like what does this say about the kind of god, God is?—and what does it say about us, and what it means to be the people of God?. What does this story tell us about our relationship with God?

On Friday, we were at the Climate Strike. As I was walking there, with my clergy gear on, someone called out to me, “Yay, faith community!” She gave me a thumbs up—and I kept walking, feeling pretty good.

A group of us—mostly pastors—gathered with a group called Interfaith Power and Light. There was a Klezmer Band and a strong, visible Jewish presence. As we were starting to march, a woman turned to me and said, “It’s great to see Jews doing the right thing for once.” I didn’t know for sure but my guess is that she herself was Jewish. Still, I was not sure how to reply, so I said, “And Christians, too.” Then she said, “There’s no religion like no religion.”

That, for me—in that particular moment--was a conversation stopper. So, I smiled very weakly, and kept walking.

A while later—after we had reached the Capitol—a man came up to Pastor Tom Knoll from First Trinity and he questioned him about how care for the earth fits into our religion. He was genuinely curious and confused by our presence because the general impression is that Christians could care less about the earth—We’re focused on getting everyone to believe in Jesus so that they can go to heaven when they die. Tom did a good job of hanging in there with the questions, and sharing how we were there *because* of our faith. There was a real conversation—real engagement.

The two encounters could not have been more different.

My favorite definition of “religion” is “that which binds us together.” “Lig” is the same root that we find in the word “ligament.” A ligament binds muscle to bone. In my mind and, also in my experience, *religion* is what holds us together.

And it seems to me, that there are few things that bring us closer together than wrestling. I tend to think of the wrestling that Jacob and God did as being more like freestyle Olympic wrestling than the WWE. This wrestling match between God and Jacob was not scripted—it was not for entertainment. It was a real struggle.

This struggle is so important—so definitive—that it becomes Jacob’s new identity. God gives him a new name. Instead of Jacob, it’s *Israel*, which means, “the one who strives with God.” It becomes the name of the people—Israel—the *people who wrestle with God*.

Jesus was a part of this people—we hear it clearly and painfully in this wrestling Jesus does with his Abba—his father—in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus—the one who is most attuned with God’s ways and plans—struggles with God about the path of suffering and death he knows is ahead of him.

Jesus wrestles with God—and those of us who follow him wrestle with God, too.

What is it that you are wrestling with right now? And where is God in that wrestling match?

Not every difficult thing we face is a wrestling match with God. Sometimes the cause and effect is easy to see—sometimes we can see and accept our missteps that account for the why. Wrestling with God happens when what we face looks by all accounts to be bigger than we are—and beyond our control.

In Jacob’s case, the big thing he’s facing is an encounter with his estranged twin brother Esau. These two have literally been fighting since before they were born. Jacob is a manipulator and a deceiver. He took advantage of Esau when he was hungry by buying his rights as the firstborn for a pot of lentil stew. And then he tricked his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that was supposed to go to Esau. When Esau finds out, he wants to kill Jacob.

So, their mother, Rebecca, sends Jacob away. And Jacob and Esau don’t see each other for 20 years. As it turns out, both of them do well—they’ve got wives and children; and flocks and herds. But Jacob makes his father-in-law angry, so he decides to head back home to Canaan.

Just before this wrestling match, Jacob sends some servants out with a massive gift of livestock for his brother, Esau. He’s hoping to make amends—but ever the manipulator—he also wants to show his brother just how wealthy and powerful he is.

But the hard truth is—that for all this wealth and power—Jacob can’t control his brother. He can’t make Esau forgive him. He doesn’t know whether Esau is ready to reconcile or whether he’s ready to do what he wanted to do 20 years before—kill him.

On the night of this wrestling match with God, Jacob is alone. He has a sense of the limits of his own power. He is vulnerable.

We wrestle with so many layers of things. We wrestle with climate change and the destruction of our planet. We wrestle with white supremacy and racism which has its tendrils in every aspect of our lives, including our church. And even though it might be of a much different magnitude, we wrestle with how to balance the financial aspects of our life with the ministry we are called to do. We do that as a congregation and we also do that as individuals. There is just way too much to do—and we feel crushed by the weight of it all.

So many of us are wrestling personally with losses and defeats that break our hearts and spirits. Being alone when we long for a significant relationship. Betrayal by someone we trusted completely. A debilitating illness that sucks the life out of us. Watching someone we love suffer with pain that does not abate. Being stuck because of our fear of failing. Not being able to give your child what they need. Losing your child.

These are real struggles. Present struggles. I’ve actually talked to people who are struggling with these in the last 10 days. And I know there are many more that I haven’t named.

These are the losses and defeats that drive us to wrestle with God.

God shows up to wrestle with us when we are most vulnerable. At first glance—this seems unfair.

But what if our story is Jacob’s story? What if—like Jacob—we say to God, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”? What if we say, “I don’t get it at all, God but I’m going to keep asking you.”? And all the questions and the anger and the hurt and confusion—I’m going to keep throwing them at you—because there really is nowhere else to go.

Jacob gets the blessing. There are many ways to understand what that blessing is. But today, I hear it as the blessing of seeing God in the struggle. Jacob got to see the face of God.

And the next day Jacob sees his brother Esau. And Esau runs up to Jacob, throws his arms around him and hugs and kisses him. Jacob has these words for his brother: “When you welcomed me and I saw your face, it was like *seeing the face of God.*”

Wrestling is the most intimate kind of fighting imaginable. You are close to your opponent, at the same time as you are struggling with them. That’s what our relationship with God looks like—and as hard as the wrestling is, the blessing of seeing God is there. The struggle is real. So is the blessing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.