

Date: July 31, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 18

SERMON: Wrestling with Grace

Text(s): Genesis 32:9-31; Matthew 14:13-21

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Today's sermon starts with a quiz: how many of you can identify at least one of the following three men: Shawn Michaels, Kevin Nash, Brett Hart? If you can't, don't feel bad; I couldn't identify any of them either. If you could, perhaps you should feel bad, because it means you've been watching too much TV, and in particular, you've been watching professional wrestling, and nobody should admit to that.

All three of these gentlemen apparently have been big names in that particular genre of entertainment. I won't dignify it with the term sport; professional wrestling bears about as much relationship to the real sport of wrestling as "reality TV" bears to reality, which is to say, not much.

Humor columnist Dave Barry once wrote that he was "shocked" to discover that professional wrestlers break the rules and do all sorts of nasty and illegal things to one another in order to win— things like kicking their opponent in the head or the groin when the referee isn't looking. And of course, another shocking thing he discovered in his research— the referees are apparently chosen for their inability to see.

In the conclusion of the story of Jacob which was our Old Testament lesson this morning, we hear of an ancient wrestling match, a much more serious wrestling match than any that we would see on the so-called professional wrestling matches on television. Jacob, as we've seen over the past few weeks, is a scheming, manipulative, strong-willed, ambitious person who will use anything and anyone to get what he wants. His whole life up to this point has been one long, and not particularly edifying, story of how he has outmaneuvered nearly everyone around him to further his own interests. Now he is headed for a reunion with his long-estranged

brother Esau, and he's fearing the encounter. Jacob is right to fear such a reunion. He's stolen Esau's birthright as the heir, he's stolen the patriarchal blessing, living up to his name, Jacob, the "heel-grabber," the one who trips up others by the heels, in order to get ahead of them. He has every reason to fear Esau's wrath.

When his servants tell him that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob immediately imagines a worst-case scenario, and begins his usual pattern of maneuvering and manipulating, though this time in desperation. He divides his company of servants, flocks of goats, herds of oxen and donkeys into two groups and sends each group off in a different direction so that if Esau attacks, he'll only lose half of what he's got. He even prays the sort of prayer one would expect him to pray— a self-serving reminder to God to make good on his promises to bless the descendent of Isaac who holds the birthright. He makes no promise of moral reform; he just expects God to be faithful to the covenant God made with his grandfather Abraham. He even sends Esau a bribe, hoping that a magnificent gift will buy off Esau's anger. And finally, in the middle of the night, in a last desperate and cynical maneuver, he sends his wives and children across the fords of the River Jabbok to the side of the river where Esau is approaching. In blood feuds, the slaughter of the enemy's family was normal practice. So he risks his family's survival; after all, one can always get more wives and children.

Esau will have to bypass the diversion, refuse the bribe, and deal with a crowd of women and children before he will be able to finally get to Jacob if he is so determined. Jacob stays on the north bank of the river, out of harm's immediate way, all alone, and waits to see what will happen.

But once again, Jacob discovers that he's not alone. A mysterious stranger enters the picture and immediately engages Jacob in a wrestling match? We're never really told the identity of the stranger. Is it Esau, who has sneaked in under cover of darkness? Is it God? If so, it doesn't fit our usual notions of God, for

Jacob's opponent does not, or cannot overpower him. The struggle goes on and on, and as morning begins to dawn, the opponent demands that Jacob let him go. He apparently can't simply pin Jacob to the mat for a three-count and win the match. If it's God, God is at least as hard-pressed as Jacob in this struggle.

Some interpreters have suggested that this is an ancient story-teller's way of saying in language that predates modern psychological categories, that the opponent was Jacob's long-suppressed conscience—the voice of his deeply buried true self which he has done his best to deny while allowing his “shadow side,” to dominate him. All we're told is that “*Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him all night until daybreak.*” Or that the opponent is his own fear of his brother, his twin, his alter-ego as it were. Even at the end, when his opponent dislocates Jacob's hip and he cannot continue the struggle, Jacob clutches his enemy in a fierce grip and will not turn him loose. We're simply left to guess the opponent's identity.

When his opponent tries to break his grip and leave, he tells this stranger who has defeated him, “*I will not let you go until you bless me.*” Whether Jacob's opponent is divine or the projection of his own inner struggle, he won't yield. He will strive, he will hang on literally by his fingernails if he has to, but he is going to get what he wants and needs from this mysterious wrestler.

However, Jacob's desperate demand for blessing cannot happen until something else happens first. Before Jacob can be blessed, he has to acknowledge who he is. It is Jacob's identity rather than that of his opponent that is the real issue in this wrestling match.

So in response to Jacob's fierce and desperate demand, “*I will not let you go until you bless me,*” his opponent responds by asking Jacob the most important question he will ever be asked in his whole life. It's the one question

Jacob does not want to hear, but which he cannot avoid. He can no longer fight, and he can no longer flee. He is crippled. There are no more schemes, no more manipulations, no more maneuvers. He has reached the end of his power to control. All that he can do now is face his divine interrogator, (and what is conscience but the voice of that divine interrogator?), and answer this “one overwhelming question,” to use T. S. Eliot's famous phrase: “*What is your name?*”

It's only when we imagine the emotional weight of that question to Jacob, that we understand what it must have cost him to say, “*My name is Jacob.*” My name is “heel-grabber.” My name is manipulator. My name is ambitious deceiver. My name is Jacob.

That confession brings an immediate response. And the response tells us that Jacob's interrogator, his ultimate opponent, if you will, regardless of the identity of the night-time wrestler, is indeed God. “*Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with mortals, and you have prevailed.*” From now on, one of the Hebrew names for God, El, will be part of Jacob's own name, “Isra-el.” It can mean either “one who strives with God,” or “one for whom God strives.”

Jacob asks for his opponent's name in return, but his request is denied. The opponent's identity and being remain mysterious. Jacob cannot hope to turn this encounter to his advantage by knowing his adversary's name. God's name and being is as mysterious as his sudden appearance in this story. Jacob will know that when God blesses him, it is **God** who is blessing him, and not his own schemes and slick plans. His defeat is total. He has finally met his match. Frederick Beuchner describes it as a “magnificent defeat,” but it could also be described as a “crippling victory.” It is magnificent in that it sets Jacob free from the necessity of being his own god, of controlling his

own destiny, of manipulating everyone and everything around him to stay in control. In defeat, Jacob discovers freedom and his own humanity. And that's a magnificent discovery. But the price of that discovery is costly; he'll always have a limp—he's permanently marked, and his mark will be a constant reminder of his inability to finally control and manipulate everything and everyone around him by his own will.

Jacob learns what every person must learn who has ever aspired to know God's blessing. Life that is blessed by God has a paradox that runs through it. At the very heart of the mysterious relationship between our lives and God, there is this paradox: we win by losing; we triumph in the midst of defeat; we confess our name, and are given a new name.

Certainly those who have gotten involved in a twelve-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous, have discovered the necessity of confessing their name, of naming who they are. The road to recovery, the road to healing, the road to transformation begins with naming ourselves and acknowledging our own vulnerability and powerlessness to control our own lives.

This paradox is true for everyone one of us, not just for those who wrestle with addictions or compulsions. Our naming of ourselves before God is a fundamental prerequisite to experiencing God's grace. It's not a prerequisite for God being gracious to us; telling who we are does not convince God to bless us. Grace is a free gift, the origins of which are in God's own mysterious being, in God's own desire and willingness to bless rather than curse. But until we stop thinking that we can wrestle our way to blessing by our own power and ambition, we'll never recognize it or experience it as the transforming gift that it is.

A former colleague and friend who is now in his 70's, and who had been the pastor of one of

the largest churches in the New Jersey conference, told me over lunch one day the story of his own wrestling match. He was known among his colleagues and congregations for being one of the hardest working pastors they'd seen. He took pride in working 65-80 hour weeks, and gave his associates a hard time if they were unwilling or unable to work the same kind of hours. But all the while, he was frozen up inside, desperately unhappy, trapped in a loveless and destructive marriage, but scared to death to admit it. So he threw himself into his work so that he wouldn't have to face the roots of his own unhappiness.

But he, too, at last, like Jacob, came to the fords of the Jabbok, and encountered his most dreaded adversary. For him, that encounter happened in a small group of laypeople from the congregation who had committed themselves to meet weekly on Monday evenings to pray for the church and for a clear sense of vision and direction for their life together as a congregation. After some months, when people had gotten to know and trust one another, one of the couples began sharing that they were divorcing because their marriage was just too painful for both of them and had been for a long time. For their own healing, they needed to separate.

He told me he was shocked, not by the fact that this couple were divorcing, but because they were so honest in sharing this with their fellow prayer-group members. He said, "Larry, in all my years in ministry, I'd never seen honesty like that before, and I realized then that the lack of that sort of honesty was what had killed my own marriage, and was literally killing me. And it came to me that my workaholicism and the subtle pride I took in it because it was for the church, was just another way of being dishonest about who I really was and what I was really like."

As did Jacob, so did he win a crippling victory. He took a long, hard, merciless look in the mirror, and with ruthless honesty, named

himself— a workaholic who used his work as an excuse to avoid dealing with his marriage relationship and his own failure to love. It was painful, but it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to him. Out of the pain of that defeat, he emerged a new person, with a new name. He has discovered that he actually can love again and receive love from someone else. He can actually relate to people instead of hiding from them in his work. He told me, “Larry, for the first time in my life, I’ve discovered what grace means. I’ve experienced grace. I’ve discovered I don’t have to make it all happen myself, I don’t have to hide from my own feelings or other people any more. I’m tasting what it means to be free. But, you know,” he continued, “I have to confront that old stuff in me every single day. I have to be honest before God about who I am every day. Otherwise, the dishonesty will just take over again.”

Jesus said it this way, *“The one who tries to save his life will lose it; but the one who loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will find it.”* Who can understand that? But then, paradoxes aren’t meant to be understood—they’re meant to be lived in.

So Jacob loses, and by losing, gains the victory. After God blesses him, he names the place where his wrestling match took place Peniel, which means “the face of God,” for he said, *“I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”*

When the long-feared encounter with Esau takes place the next day, Jacob limps out to meet his fate, ready now for whatever comes, even if it’s his brother’s deadly anger. But listen: *Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. . . . Jacob said, ‘Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favor.’”* The victory that comes through defeat, through our encounter with the divine wrestler, is a victory that not only transforms us personally, but has the power to heal our broken

relationships as well. To see the face of our enemy transformed by reconciliation is to see the face of God.

When Esau asks why Jacob has sent him a lavish gift of sheep and goats and donkeys, Jacob replies, *“Please accept my gift, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.”* Could the old Jacob, the old heel-grabber have made such a statement? I don’t think so. But Israel could, the man who wrestled with God, who was defeated and blessed by God could. And only someone who has lived through that terrible letting go, that terrible unselfing, as Jacob did, can see it for what it truly is, the gracious dealing of a God who will never rest until he has set us free from our own chains.