

“God Wrestlers”

Mark 12:28-34 & Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Pastor James York

November 8, 2015

Chaplin Roy Lawrence recalls a patient who asked to see him, because he was in great emotional distress. He was in the last stages of cancer and was feeling very guilty, because he had spent the previous night ranting, raving, and swearing at God. The following morning he felt dreadful. He imagined that his chance of eternal life had now been lost forever and that God would never forgive one who had so cursed and abused God. Chaplin Roy asked, “What do you think is the opposite of love?” The man replied, “Hate.” Roy replied, “No the opposite of love is indifference. You have not been indifferent to God or you would never have spent the night talking to God, honestly telling God what was in your heart and mind. Do you know the Christian word that describes what you have been doing? The word is ‘prayer.’ You have spent the night praying.”

Deuteronomy proclaims the Shema. **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** “**Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**” The Shema is the quintessential command on how to live every moment of our life. We are to love God with our whole heart, love God with all this is in us, love God with all we’ve got. Love is action. Love is not passive, cynical, or indifferent. Love is engagement, involvement, and commitment. We tend to sanitize and romanticize love. Love at times is hard work, hurtful, and stressful.

Philip Yancey recalls an important lesson from early on in his marriage; not communicating is much worse than fighting. In a fight both parties stay engaged. In a relationship if one party becomes indifferent, passive, or withdrawals then that relationship is in serious trouble. Yancey explains to truly love God we must become God wrestlers. There is too much pain on earth, too many questions, too many dilemmas to not question, engage, and wrestle with God.

God is certainly not indifferent in God’s love for us. The very reason we are even able to love is because God first loved us. Before the command to love God is given Deuteronomy reviews all these beautiful, miraculous, intimate ways God has and is loving us. We have the supreme example of love: Jesus coming to earth; God living among us, caring for us, healing us; and then dying on the cross for us; so, we can spend eternity being loved by God. The life Jesus revealed is the essence of love.

Those who love God are “God-Wrestlers” Remember the Biblical account of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. Jacob did everything with great zeal. He faithfully worked for fourteen years to marry the woman he loved; yet, he also stole his brother’s birthright. Jacob learns that his hot-tempered, powerful brother is coming to meet him tomorrow. Jacob shudders as he recalls how he cheated Esau out of the family birthright. Will his brother greet him with a sword or an embrace? Jacob is full of questions, uncertainty, and frustrations. Jacob starts praying. He confesses his sin, his deceit, and trickery of his brother. He praises God for the abundance of blessings he, an unworthy person, has received from God. Next he pleads with God, please rescue me from my brother. Jacob continues his prayers all night long. The Bible says that Jacob wrestled with God. Jacob was loving God with everything he had, with action. Jacob was engaged, zealous, and passionate enough in his love of God to wrestle all night long. The Bible does not give the details of the wrestling match, but I bet it was not pretty. What do you think Jacob said? Do you think it was a flowery prayer or a prayer full of emotions, questions, pleadings, frustrations and rantings? Jacob fought through exhaustion with persistence still wrestling with God at dawn even after his hip socket was knocked out of joint. Bruised, limping, and drained, Jacob screamed, “I will not stop until you bless me God.” God changed Jacob’s name to Israel meaning “God-wrestler”. Then Jacob renamed that place with a name meaning “I have seen God’s face”. A little later, God wrestler approaches Esau who has 400 mean men by his side. Jacob has been transformed into Israel the God-wrestler. His struggle, fear, and hatred has been transformed into love. God wrestler says, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God” That’s transformative love. He went from fear of his brother to seeing the face of

God in his brother.

E.M. Bounds states, "Prayer in its highest form and grandest success assumes the attitude of a wrestler with God." I tried to think of a Biblical person who did not wrestle with God, who did not have to overcome some obstacle, difficulty, or emotions with love, and I could not come up with one. Often I like to jump to the end of the story where love prevails, forgiveness is received, and God redeems the situation; but, God brings this about through a transformation process. Often that process is much longer than we like.

As long as you and I are wrestling with God, asking questions, demanding action, pouring out our feelings, pointing out that there are a lot of situations that stink down here then we are loving God for we are engaged. If there comes a point where we think we have the answers or can make it our own or become indifferent, that is when we are disengaging God and becoming indifferent, the opposite of love.

Mark Biddle writes of the many people, even regular church attendees, who are indifferent today, "For many, faith is a matter of emotions and feelings, but not of daily actions. For others, belief in God is an intellectual matter primarily requiring assent to correct doctrine. For most moderns, religion belongs in a distinct and quite separate sphere of life. Believers equate faith with normally passive church attendance. The Shema, however, insists in a number of ways that devotion to the one God, our sole Redeemer, cannot be compartmentalized matter. Three times the Shema calls for devotion to God with all one's self. The call for obedience lays claim to all one's decisions and determination." The love of God is action and must be total.

In Philip Yancey's recent book on prayer he describes how he used to worry about his deficiency of faith, his questions, anger, and frustration over injustice and suffering. Then he realized love is an action, an exercise, like a muscle that needs to be put into action to grow. Yancey states, "I may not be able to summon up much belief in miracles, or dream big dreams, but I can indeed exercise my faith by engaging with God." Our scripture this morning commands us to engage God and wrestle with God with every fiber of our being with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might 24/7.

God created us, because God wanted to love and be loved. Early on Adam and Eve broke the bond of love, and we have been failing to love in a variety of ways ever since. God is lovingly working to restore all relationships, but God loves us too much to trample on free will so restoring loving relationships has been painfully slow, fraught with error and punctuated by stops and starts. The Bible is a long complex love story which shows a steady advance in intimacy with God. God loves us too much to force orders upon us or to impose change through external force. Instead God works on the inside. God engages us. God wrestles with us turning fear into hope, hate into love, indifference into action, despair into joy, chaos into peace, guilt into graceful forgiveness. God wrestles with us to heal us, enable us, and inspire us to love. When we love God enough to engage God with all our emotions, thoughts and actions both positive and negative, then God transforms us enabling us to more deeply love God and one another.

In Jesus' day many felt that worship was a matter of attending temple believing that God's presence was only there. But when questioned by the Samaritan woman about the proper place for worship, Jesus replied, "True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." God's presence is in what seems to be the most unlikely place; ordinary people like the Samaritan woman, you, and me. God lives inside us and God longs for loving worship not just at church on Sunday but every moment of our life, wherever we may be.

God wrestles with us, so we will become intimate, intertwined, partners, and coworkers in the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "The universe is done. The greater masterpiece, still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing God's grand design needs the help of men and women." God loves us so much that God chooses to create through us. On earth Jesus focused his energy into intimately loving twelve disciples and then commanded them to love others, to grow the church, and to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Deuteronomy states, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." God is hoping love will become the essence of every aspect of our life then we will join God in transforming the world with love. Ronald Clements puts it this way, "Love lies at the heart of worship and is a leaven that must ultimately affect the entire understanding of faith...for divine love and grace

to become real and effective in human society, it must be reciprocated in human action.”

How do we know if you are growing in love? When you are fully engaged with God in every thought, feeling, and action. When you can look at the faces of more and more people and see them as a beloved brothers and sisters. When your love is contagious to everyone around you and you are passionate about passing your love of God on to children. When love permeates every conversation every second of the day at home, at school, at work, wherever life takes you.

Orthodox Jews literally bind the words of the Shema on one’s head and hands, their doorpost, and gates. Twice daily they put on phylacteries, small leather boxes containing the words of the Shema. They affix to their doorpost a Mezuzah, a small container that contains the Shema. That is their ritual of showing their love of God. What rituals do you do to show your love of God?

We are entering a season that is full of change and for many a faster pace. Society will tell you this season is all about materialism and indulgence. Scripture commands love God; love one another for this is the essence of life in any season. What family rituals will you engage in that demonstrates your love for God? How will you show those around you how to love God?

Life is tough, full of questions, and uncertainties. Take all of that to God. Engage God, wrestle with God, and you will be transformed. The Franciscan’s have a benediction that captures what this transformation involves. “May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with tears, to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. And may God bless you with enough foolishness; to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done, To bring justice and kindness to all children and the poor. Amen”