

# “Wrestling”

Genesis 32:24-31

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**Prayer for Understanding** Your ways are wonderful, O God. The unfolding of your words gives light. As we turn to your Word read and proclaimed, let that light radiate into even the darkest shadows. Make your face to shine upon us, and teach us, your servants. We long for your good news. Amen.

Jacob wrestled all night long. As the match progressed, he saw the face of God in others. Jacob left the match striving to reconcile relationships. **Genesis 32:24-31 “This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a person came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the person saw that they would not prevail, they touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the person said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” “What is your name?” the person asked. He replied, “Jacob.” “Your name will no longer be Jacob from now on you will be called Israel, because you have striven with God and with people and have prevailed.” “Please tell me your name,” Jacob said. “Why do you want to know my name?” the person replied. Then they blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel (which means “face of God”), for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip.”**

This was an epic wrestling match of reconciliation. The name Jacob means “heel grabber”. Jacob grabbed his brother’s heel at birth in an attempt to be born first. Jacob is only a few generations after God called Sarah and Abraham, and everyone, to bless all people. If you are familiar with Genesis then you are aware that Jacob, and his family is a mine field of explosive jealousy, fighting, misunderstanding, trickery, coning, favoritism, swindling, hurt, pain, and suffering. The family that was called to bless all people lost most of their ability to see the face of God in each other.

Jacob was so focused on being first, winning, being right, getting ahead that he no longer saw the face of God in his brother. At the time of the wrestling match, Jacob and Esau have not spoken or seen each other since Jacob stole Esau’s birth right. Jacob will meet Esau in the morning. Jacob prepares for bed anticipating an intense, ugly fight with his brother. Jacob is plotting how he will win. Jacob is certain he can seize what he wants by his own strength.

Suddenly, Jacob is wrestling with a mysterious person. Who was the stranger? Was it divine? Was it human? Was it Jacob wrestling himself? Was it Esau? Was it old victims of his deceit returned in his imagination for revenge? Was it God? Was it all of the above? We don’t know. All we do know is that when Jacob got through with the experience, he recognized that God was somewhere in it. The wrestling match went on and on and on and little by little Jacob saw the face of God in his brother, his family, in all people. Transformed Jacob desires to love all people, to be reconciled with all people. Jacob’s compassion grew enabling him to truly see others and their needs. Jacob realized his failure to help, to bless others, and it caused him to limp. The love of God wrestled with proud Jacob. In the morning, Jacob limped toward his brother eager to reconcile. Jacob shouted to his brother, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” “Esau ran to meet Jacob, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.” The brothers celebrated their reconciliation.

Pastor Thomas Long writes, “We recognize our own stories in Jacob. In our hearts, human beings are wrestlers and brawlers and fighters. That is essentially what God told Rebecca when she complained about her pregnancy. God said that it was not just two babies that were struggling in Rebekah’s womb. It was the divided human condition struggling there. It was not just two babies; it was two nations. It was Israel and Edom, hunters and gatherers, farmers and ranchers, red states and blue states, old light and new light, liberals, and conservatives. It’s “Momma always liked you better.” “Yeah, but you were the apple of Daddy’s eye.” It is the human struggle at war, and Jacob epitomizes it. And all of us are Jacob because our hearts want what they want, and we will wrestle life to the ground to get it.”

I was born like Jacob. I like to win. I like to be right. I like to get my own way. Growing up my mom and I would argue, both striving to win the argument. Sometimes we were not even concerned about the topic.

Each of us wanted to prove that we were right. The love of God and I have been through numerous wrestling matches and I am sure we will have numerous more matches. God has expanded my compassion, has enabled me to see the face of God in more and more people so now I am more concerned about building a relationship than winning, being right or getting my own way.

Wrestling involves going deep, listening to other perspectives, listening to the experiences that formed those perspectives, seeing the face of God in another, inspiring you to love and bless them.

Growing up on the farm in rural Wisconsin I didn't know anyone who was homeless. Regrettably, I had little compassion for the homeless. I did little to care for them, advocate and help them. My giving for the homeless was lackluster. They were far down my list when I cast my vote. In seminary I volunteered as a tutor in a soup kitchen. Suddenly I was in relationship with people who were homeless. I heard their experiences. Now I strive to bless them, to discover opportunities to provide housing for all.

God loves us too much to leave us languishing in broken relationships. Thomas Long tells of an experience with one of his students. "One day, after chapel at the seminary where I was teaching, I was walking across campus, and one of my students hailed me, 'Dr. Long, I need a word with you. My supervising field education pastor is making me preach next Sunday.' Preaching professor that I am, I said, 'Good.'" "No, it is not good. He is making me preach the lectionary." Again, I said, "Good." She said, "It is not good. Have you read the lectionary passages for next week? They are about judgment. I don't believe in judgment. I believe in love. I believe in mercy. I believe in kindness. It took me three years of therapy to get over judgment. I am not going to preach judgment." We talked about that for a while, to no avail, and then she changed the subject. She wanted to tell me about her family. She and her husband were having a problem. It was their youngest son, the last to be at home. He was in trouble. He was giving them trouble. She said, "We don't even know his whereabouts most of the time. For example, last night my husband and I were having supper. We didn't know where my son was. We think he's involved with drugs; we just don't know where he is or what we are up against. Suddenly, in the middle of supper, the door swings open and there he is. I said, 'Would you like some supper?' He looked like he was going to spit, stalked down the hall to his room, and slammed the door. My husband got up and turned on ESPN. That is what he always does in this situation. It is the way he always responds. But something got into me," she said. "I got up from the table and walked trembling down the hall. I am afraid of my own son, physically afraid of my own son. When I got to his room, I pushed open the door, and I said to him, 'Now you listen to me. I love you so much I am not going to put up with this anymore.'" I said to her, "I think you just preached a wonderful sermon on judgment." That is what judgment is. It is not God punishing us; it is God setting things right. It is God saying to us, "I love you so much I am not going to put up with this anymore." The great theologian Karl Barth once said, "Do not fear the wrath of God; fear the love of God, for the love of God will strip away everything that stands between you and God." The love of God ambushed proud Jacob. We don't know everything that happened there, but we do know what came out of it at the end. Jacob, the old street brawler got up changed and walked away with a limp. He got up transformed; he got up with a new name; he got up with a blessing to carry with him into the promised land. He reconciled with his brother."

It is easy to only see the face of God in the people who are like you and share your positions. God loves you too much to put up with you fighting with your siblings (by siblings I mean all people for we are all children of God) We can adamantly disagree without fighting. We can passionately work on opposing solutions without damaging our relationship. Wrestling involves striving to understand the positions of all people on all sides of the issue. Wrestling involves hearing another's experiences, learning how they formulated their position.

Take a controversial issue and search your heart for the Jacob within yourself. A Jacob would rather be right than be in relationship. A Jacob would rather win than hear another's perspective. A Jacob would rather have their position imposed on others than build community.

Take whether one should stand or kneel for the flag. Many people have a position on this issue. They feel they are right. They fight for their position. They want their position to win. They want to force their position on everyone else. This approach destroys relationships. Wrestling involves seeing the face of God in people on the other side of the issue, building a relationship with them, listening to their experience, discovering why they do what they do. Who are they honoring? Who are they helping? Both those who stand and those who kneel believe they are doing what is best for humanity, what will create the most loving future for all people. God loves us too much to let our fighting divide us so God wrestles with us to unite us.

We do not need to agree to have a wonderful relationship. One of the blessings of a great relationship is the ability to agree to disagree, to have passionate debates about an issue, to hold firm to your position and learn why another has a different position. In a great relationship one sees the face of God in their sibling. In a healthy relationship each side can passionately present, advocate and work for their position and respect, care and love each other. God wrestles with us to transform us from being against others to being for everyone.

After the wrestling match Jacob became Israel, he was transformed from a man who thought about what was best for himself, to a man who thought about what is best for all people. God loves us too much to leave us languishing in broken relationships. God's love is transforming each of us to build loving relationships with all.

Apply this to all the issues we are dealing with today. As you formulate your position on how to develop a police force, where all police, protect and serve. Build a relationship and listen to a police officer and a person who is a victim of police brutality.

God loves us too much to let us continue to dehumanize others. God changed the name from Jacob, a person who thought primarily about himself, to Israel, a people who strive to bless all. If one person is discriminated against because of their race, gender identity, birth country or for any reason then our relationships are broken. God is wrestling with us so we will see the face of God in them and desire to build loving relationships.

John Lewis has wrestled with God. You can tell by the way he strives to build relationships. John Lewis said, "You are the light. Never let anyone — any person or any force — dampen, dim, or diminish your light ... Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won." "Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society." "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something." Regarding the Justice in Policing Act, John said, "A democracy cannot thrive where power remains unchecked and justice is reserved for a select few. Ignoring these cries and failing to respond to this movement is simply not an option — for peace cannot exist where justice is not served." John implores us, "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America."

God loves us too much to leave us in the mess we have created, to leave us languishing in broken relationships. God is wrestling with us to bring us into loving relationship with everyone. Amen