

Genesis 31:22-31 Bill Uetrict 19 Pentecost 10.16.25

When I was growing up, in the little suburb where we went to church and where my wife lived, there was a department store named Rink's, a warehouse for a lot of junk, as I now view it. Rink's on Saturday morning sponsored "Big Time Wrestling" on WCPO, Cincinnati's Channel Nine. For some reason I watched this show somewhat regularly. Wow, that was bad television! Even the announcers from Rink's were less than stellar. But nonetheless, it was Saturday morning fare for me, providing entertainment for me with wrestlers like Bo Bo Brazil and Andre the Giant.

Every time we receive the Genesis 32 passage about Jacob wrestling with a man at the river Jabbok I think of Bobo and Rink's because in some ways this passage reveals to us the big-time wrestling match that life is. Now admittedly, not everyone is in agreement about what this story is telling us. I suspect that it has a long history. That is, it is a story that has been passed on from generation to generation, picking up steam as it travels through history.

In its origins, this was probably a story that is known as an etiology, an explanation of origin story. Ancients loved to tell stories about where certain things came from, particularly the names of cities. I surmise that perhaps this Genesis story was told to indicate why Peniel is named what it is. And the verse that follows our text tells us that this story explains why the Israelites don't eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket. Actually, there isn't any evidence that they followed such an eating prohibition, but probably some nation at some time had that kind of restriction. Maybe the story originally came from some other nation. Who knows for sure?

What is for sure is that these etiological concerns aren't why the story shows up in the Bible. The editor of Genesis obviously had something else in mind when he included this narrative in his storytelling. There is something about the wresting, the name change, the hurt hip that gives us an insight into the meaning of the story for ancient Israel and for us.

Jacob, whose name means the cheater, the supplanter, the heel grabber finds himself in flight from his brother Esau and his Uncle Laban because he has done miserable things to both of them. During that fleeing, he comes to a shallow portion of the River Jabbok, where he sends his family, his servants and all his stuff across the stream. And before he himself crosses the stream, he has a wrestling match, a match that is much longer than the ones Bobo Brazil was involved in. This match goes on *all* night.

Let's tell the truth. The battles that we are involved in are not short-term wrestling matches. They often go on and on and on. And very often we rehearse them at night. How many nights can we not sleep because our struggles invade our subconscious minds. They become a part of our dream world. During the day, we can repress them, but not at night, because then we aren't so much in control.

Initially, we are told that "a man" wrestles with Jacob. Who is this guy? Is it his brother Esau? Is it his uncle Laban? Is it he himself? Is he the man? After all, Jacob has been a bum. Is the struggle with himself? Perhaps. But the story tells us later (is this part of the evolution of the narrative?) that Jacob longs for this figure to bless him. Humans often seek *divine* blessing. Is the man a *divine* being? Genesis tells us that Jacob's name in the wrestling is changed to Israel, because he has striven *with God* and has

prevailed. The name Israel probably means “the one who strives with God.” Is the man God? Perhaps. Maybe it doesn’t matter because maybe the truth is we struggle with ourselves and with God. Maybe much of life is a struggle.

The name change to Israel is telling to me. This story is not about an individual. This story is about a people, a nation, and its identity. Who is Israel? They are the people who struggle. Honestly, they often have been bums. They have been cheaters.

Ultimately, they are the people who wrestle with God. That is their identity. That is our identity. Life is fundamentally a struggle. Yes, we come out of the match alive. Yes, God blesses us. But we aren’t in control. God will not tell us God’s name. We ask for it. We want to know it so that we can figure everything out, so we can call the shots, so that the mystery of God is no longer a mystery but a matter of certainty. Faith is much more about struggle than it is certainty.

Sadly, so much religion today is about securing certainty, knowing the mind of God, telling everybody what they ought to do, figuring out who is in and who is not. But God will not reveal God’s name because God is God. The God who blesses us is the one who will not give us control over him. We wrestle with that which is much larger than us. And the match is tough stuff. Yes, Jacob comes out on top. But he doesn’t leave the match unscathed. He leaves it limping. He’s got a hip problem.

The struggle that life is takes its toll on us. Even the relationship with God is not without its challenges. We want it to be all roses, but it’s not. Again, faith is seldom a matter of clarity. It’s struggle. It’s a risk. It’s an invitation sometimes into being bruised. Jesus lived out

faith, like no other person, but look what happened to him. He was killed. Here was a man who loved, welcomed, healed, and forgave. And the religious and political leaders responded by crucifying him. The life of faith isn't easy. It's big-time wrestling—wrestling with yourself, wrestling with others, and yes, wrestling with God.

One of the great things about the Bible is that it reveals a whole lot of people who wrestle. Part of the brilliance of the Bible is its honesty about people and their struggles. I provide you with a challenge. Find a Biblical character who has it all together, whose faith is a matter of certainty and clarity, whose actions are always commendable. Well, maybe Jesus is such a character, but I can't find anyone else. The Bible is real. All the heroes are strugglers. Life's a struggle. Faith is a struggle.

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Faith is a struggle. We need encouragement to move forward. Today's encouragement comes from a bothersome widow who won't put up with the lack of action on the part of a corrupt and mean judge, a judge who doesn't care about people or the desires of God. This widow won't let the judge off the hook. She, a victim by nature and probably a victim of a particular injustice, won't stop bugging the judge until she gets what she wants. And what she wants is justice.

The story tells us that the judge eventually gives her what she demands, not because he desires to do the right thing, but because he's tired of being bothered by her. “All right, have your way! I don't want to have to deal with you anymore.”

Jesus tells us that if an unjust and mean judge will grant justice, how much more will our God, who is loving and merciful, respond to the needs of his chosen who cry to him day and night?

It seems to me that Jesus here is giving us permission to be a little irritating sometimes. When justice is what we are seeking and justice is not what we are seeing, Jesus seems to be saying that we should keep at it. Don't give up. Don't throw in the towel. Hang in there. Press forward. Ask. Demand. Be irritating. Be bold. Faith is not a matter of cowering before God, as if it would be impolite to impose upon God. God is gracious, merciful and loving. You can presume upon God. You can presume upon that relationship. You can wrestle with God. Your life of prayer doesn't have to be sweet, polite, and appropriate. Especially if you are after justice, you can be demanding. So, don't back down.

Matthew Fox says that prayer is not simply the words we speak to God. He says that prayer "is a radical response to life." Prayer is not simply the words we utter to God at night while we are falling asleep. Prayer is our response to the gift that life is. Prayer is our discipleship, our actions on behalf of an unjust world.

"Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and *not to lose heart*." Don't stop doing the good things that need to be done for our hurting world. Don't throw in the towel. Don't give up. Don't let go. In word and deed, continue to wrestle, especially when that wrestling has to do with injustice. In word and deed, sing the songs of the Civil Rights movement: "We Shall Not Be Moved," and "We Shall Overcome."

Following Jesus and living by faith are big-time wrestling matches. Stay in the ring. Don't abandon the struggle. Continue to

ask hard questions. Continue to wonder and doubt. Continue to cry out with the widow for justice. And as you are doing all of that, you probably will hear Jesus say, “Indeed, I have found faith on earth.”