

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

There were two times each year in High School which I particularly dreaded, and both were in gym class. One was wrestling. The other was square dancing. Now, I understand that some young men actually like wrestling, and are good at it. Bailey Dwyer, for example. And I suppose there are teenagers who thought that square dancing was really a hoot. But me, no. When I heard that annual rumor that we were going to wrestle that day in gym, I typically headed straight for the nurse's office, where I knew Mrs. Ferguson would be sympathetic and let me lie down for an hour if I told her I had a headache. She was an old friend of my mother's, by the way. And usually leg cramps would work to get me out of listening to those old scratchy old square dance records and tripping over my own feet. Now I know we have former phys ed teachers and coaches in the congregation, but I have to ask...who in their right mind would think that random teenagers could endure such a curriculum! I just needed to get that off my chest.

After twenty years of being away in a foreign land, Jacob is on his way back home. But it's a not a leisurely journey. Because of his life of trickery and deceit, he is on the run. His father-in-law, Laban, is pursuing him from the east, and his brother, Esau, with 400 angry men, is riding out to confront him from the west. Jacob has brought his whole household, wives, children, and livestock with him, and he is as anxious for their safety as he is for his own. He sends them on ahead, across the river, while he intends to spend a night alone with his fears, a night of coming to grips with the truth, a dark night of the soul. He intends to do this in solitude, to work out a solution, to find a fix for the predicament he is in. He expects to be alone. Standing there on the riverbank, he watches as the twilight settles in and the stars, one by one, become visible. And he remembers the promise made first to his grandfather Abraham, that their descendants would number as the stars in the heavens. The stars are always there, of course, but are only visible when the sky is darkened by the absence of sunlight. The reminder of God's promises is often overlooked during the business of the day, but alone in the dark at night, Jacob is struck with awe, and with fear, and with the mystery of it all.

And then he feels the hands of another pulling and tugging at him, and for a whole long night he must wrestle with one he doesn't recognize. It is a long night of struggle, of grunts and groans, of well-matched strength, and as the dawn begins to brighten the eastern sky, it is about to come to a conclusion. Who is this stranger with whom Jacob has struggled all night? And tell me please, who won? I think Jacob knew all along that it must be God with whom he wrestled, and though God must have known, even in the darkness, that Jacob was the competitor, God asks him his name anyway. Jacob identifies himself, that is to say, he reveals himself. He reveals himself as the one who has a reputation for lying and cheating and defrauding. As the darkness fades, there is no hiding who he has been. He is stripped of all pretense and stands naked before God, as if just saying his own name has been his necessary confession. He has been humbled. He will always have a limp to remind him of that. So, who won the match? Well, it seems that God needs to cry "uncle" and asked to be released from Jacob's grip. But then, as Jacob limps away, God is probably grinning that the wily Jacob has finally met his match and has learned his lesson and earned his blessing. The blessing God had already given him long before.

See, the irony is that Jacob has struggled and struggled for something which he already has! He desperately wants those things which have been promised to his family, Property, Progeny,

Prosperity, and Protection, but doesn't recognize them when they are staring him in the face. He doesn't see their face-value. It isn't until he comes face-to-face with God that he has the faintest clue that the mercy and grace of God has been with him all along. It takes an emotional, exhausting struggle to make him aware of God's loving blessing. When we read this passage at our Thursday evening Bible study, I asked if anyone who was participating had experienced such a struggle with God. Had they ever desperately wrestled with God, hoping and praying to receive a well-placed blessing of their own? And just who had won? We each told of personal times which had seemed like a wrestling match, or perhaps a ritual dance, with God. And we were able to say that, in reflection, no one had truly "lost", but rather that these times seemed to be a win-win. God gave us blessings, and we were transformed.

The disciples want Jesus to call it a day, to stop teaching and healing now, so that the thousands of people who have followed them to this remote place can be dismissed and go home for supper. Or to go into one of the villages to buy food. But Jesus turns to them and gives this imperative: "You feed them!" Reading between the lines, which I think scripture always provokes us to do, Jesus seems to be saying: "Listen, there's no need to stop doing the work of the Kingdom right now; Look, I know that you have been talking among yourselves, and have been wrestling with this problem, and that's a good thing. But you already have what you need to solve this puzzle. You are already able to make a difference." "That's easy for you to say," they reply, "all we have are these few fish and some bread. That's just not going to be enough." Ironically, though, it turns out to be more than enough. Once they take the portion to Jesus to be blessed, what seemed to be insignificant turns out to be miraculously sufficient, even abundant. What they thought was impossible turns out to be easy. They had the solution all along. They just needed to take it all to Jesus, the fish, the bread, and their anxiety.

Take your problems to Jesus. If you feel you're being pursued, if you feel desperate, if you experience scarcity, take your life to Jesus to be blessed, broken, and given away. You may well find that what you think you lack has already been given to you. You may be startled to find yourself face-to-face with God. And all this time you thought you were wrestling with some demon, or trying to do some ritual dance all by yourself, when, in fact, God has been your partner all along, and has already equipped you for service in the Kingdom of Heaven. Recognizing our blessings can be transforming. Jacob, who in Genesis is famous for re-naming places to honor his experiences of God, decides to call this place where he has spent the night in a struggle for a promise he, in fact, already had, Peniel and Penuel. Both words mean 'the face of God'. He has come to recognize God face-to-face, Peniel / Penuel. Meanwhile, he, too, has been given a new name, "Israel". Though he now has a tell-tale limp and his stride is no longer quite so proud, he has been transformed into the appropriate father of his nation, and bears the full identity of his people. The disciples also have seen God face-to-face through Jesus, have partnered in his work, and have been transformed and blessed. The men and women who shared Christ's ministry went on to build the identity of the church, appropriate parents of a reinvigorated faith. And we too, dear friends, have received both the imperatives of Christ and the blessing of God. May we, too, recognize them and be transformed. Amen