“Wrestle-Mania”

Gen 32:22-31

August 6, 2017

How many of you are familiar with wrestling? I am not talking about the fake stuff you see on TV. I am not talking about Hulk Hogan or the Undertaker. I am talking about real wrestling that you would see in the Olympics. Or that you would see down at the high school. There is no harder sport in the world. As the legendary coach and wrestler Dan Gable said, “Once you’ve wrestled, everything in life is easy.” And coach Gable would know. He went 64-0 in high school, 118-1 in college, won the gold in Munich without giving up a point. And he also won 15 national championships in 21 seasons as the Iowa wrestling coach.

Many people thought that Dan was fearless. No one could stop him on the wrestling mat. Except for Larry Owings in college. A loss that still upsets him till this day. But he had a major fear of being left alone when he was a child. His parents fought and drank a lot. They always seemed one bad night away from breaking up and leaving Dan without a family. His parents would often go out on the town and leave him home with his older sister Diane. He would park himself right in front of the giant picture window at their home. He would wonder if they would come back home and get divorced. Or maybe not come home at all. All night he would sit there and look down the street, looking for headlights. Several years later, he was on a fishing trip with his parents. His older sister, Dian who was 19 was at home alone. That night, Diane was gruesomely murdered by a local teenage boy. A neighbor found her body. Their parents were torn apart by the murder. We need to sell this house and get out of here, they thought. Dan begged them to stay. The fighting and the drinking got much worse. No one would touch her room. His fears were coming true. His family was dying with her. Dan had enough. He went across the hall and climbed into Diane’s bed. His parents opened the room a half hour later, inspired by his courage. He didn’t sleep a wink that night. The next morning, he moved all of his things into her room. In time, the arguments slowed and then stopped. His parents focused on Dan. Dan’s wrestling career began to take off and his parents never missed a match. He loved the look on their faces when he won. He wrestled with a fury that his opponents would never understand[[1]](#footnote-1).

Jacob’s wrestling career begins in our scripture for today. This is the last time I will preach on Jacob for a while, so if you are sick of him, this is the last time. From lasts weeks passage we learn that Jacob’s family grows by leaps and bounds. Between Rachel, Leah and their maids Zilpah and Bilhah, eleven sons and one daughter are brought into the world. Jacob asks permission from Laban to head back to his home country. After some trickery by both parties, they eventually part on good terms. They leave and when entering Canaan, he realized that eventually he will cross paths with his brother Esau. This was the meeting that has scared Jacob his entire life. Remember from two weeks ago, Jacob’s experience at Bethel. He hadn’t really changed since then. He was still the same trickster. He was eventually tricked by Laban into marrying Leah. Then he tricks Laban with some cattle. Seems like he hasn’t learned his lesson yet. This will inevitably set up the conflict between Jacob and God at the edge of the Jabbok river. Will Jacob ever become anything other than a trickster?

Jacob decides to send gifts and messengers to his brother Esau. He sends all kinds of goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys as a present. Still he is scared. What is this reunion going to look like? Remember Esau pledged to kill Jacob after he is done grieving

for Isaac’s death.

Jacob gets to the edge of the river. He sends his entire family and everything he owns across the river. Now, just like at Bethel, he is alone and vulnerable. Then a man came and wrestled with him until daybreak. Could you imagine what that was like? How many hours was that? In regular high school wrestling, it is only three two-minute periods. In a tournament, you might wrestle five minutes. So, you are looking at thirty minutes of total wrestling time. There also is a referee, which is what I am. I would blow the whistle if anything unsportsmanlike happens or if they go out of bounds. Here there is no mat, there are no rules. Just wrestling for hours on the bare hard ground. Apparently for a first time, (that we know of) Jacob is pretty good. The man is not winning against Jacob. He decides to strike Jacob on the hip. Flagrant Misconduct, match is over, Jacob wins. The man will not be allowed to compete in the next two events according to national rules. Well not in this case, there are no rules. The match continues with Jacob badly injured. Jacob will not give up. The man says, “Let me go, for the day is breaking. Perhaps because of an ancient belief that God must be gone by daybreak. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” What is your name, the man asks? Which seems odd since if this man is God, he should know Jacob’s name. The man says, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” Remember the power of names in the ancient middle east. Jacob means one who grabs by the heal. Or cheat. The names people and gods were given tells about the fundamental character of the person. Now that Jacob’s fundamental character had been changed by God, he wants to know what is God’s character. “Please tell me your name!” What are you really like? But God would not give Jacob his name. Before Jacob only made agreements with God on equal terms. That he was an equal partner in the transaction. Sure, you keep me safe and prosper me and I will follow you. But after this wrestling match, God will not reciprocate. There is a limitation between God and Jacob. God is more powerful. Now Jacob will recognize this. Then God blessed him.

Again, Jacob loves naming places that have significance for him. He names this place Peniel. It is where Jacob saw God face to face and survived. In ancient times, it was believed that seeing God face to face meant death. But somehow Jacob survives. The wrestler leaves and Jacob passes Peniel. Still with that limp. Jacob will have consequences from this encounter of God. He will always have this limp. According to this passage, Israelites to this day do not eat thigh muscle near the hip because of this story. It is a testimony to the truth of the story. It is not mentioned elsewhere of this dietary restriction.

Now is Jacob ready for his impending reunion with Esau? Maybe. He went to this river expecting to see Esau soon, but instead met God. This is like Bethel, where he was vulnerable, alone and did not expect the meeting. Jacob did not leave a changed man from Bethel. But here at Peniel he leaves changed. Jacob has a new name, Israel. He leaves with God’s blessing, but also with the unmistakable limp. He will not be able to have his usual trickster swagger, now it is a stagger.

Think about wrestling for a minute. Outwardly it is an extremely physical activity. The object is to pin and defeat your opponent. To use your strength and skill as best you can. Most of all, it is an extremely mentally taxing activity. You don’t just step out on the mat with no preparation. You have to train. Be in great physical condition. Learn many different types of moves. You need to realize that different opponents will attack you differently. You need to find your weaknesses and learn how to correct them. Your opponent on the mat is not your only opponent. You are also wrestling yourself. Wrestling against the pain. Against wanting to give up. I’m too tired. There is no way I can beat this guy. I have definitely been there, as I am sure you have.

Jacob’s wrestling with God was not just physical. It was mental. All of the times he tried to do things for himself. All of the times he wanted to use God for his own purposes. Jacob may think that he won the match. His opponent asked to leave for daybreak was coming. But Jacob also leaves with that limp. A marker that his life will never be the same. These marks stay with us.

Just like with Coach Gable, we all have struggles that we go through. Hopefully none of those are as bad as having your sister brutally murdered. We have all lost someone, maybe a spouse or a child. Maybe you have lost a job or the ability to move your body as you used to. These things are never easily understood. And we wrestle with God about them. Why God is this happening to me? If you really are the almighty and gracious God that you are, how come I struggle to have food to eat? If you really are this great, why did my loved one die? We look for God in those situations. We want God to be near and offer some comfort. But we have to keep on surviving, even with all of the loss around us.

This passage makes me think of my grandfather, Roger. His wife of 65 years, Betty, my grandmother died this past fall. He had always assumed that he would be the first to go. He had a bout with kidney cancer a few years ago that we all thought would take his life. But he kept on going. Now with this loss of his life partner, he feels lost. He is just getting by, just by getting up in the morning and living. He wrestles with the mysteries of God, life with a long-term wife and now life without her. That loss has left its mark on him. Has left a limp. Sometimes all he can do and all we can do is hang on. Just like Jacob did. He would not let his opponent go. I will not let you go unless you bless me. We are looking for that explanation to the mystery of God and the mystery of our lives.

Many might think that we are to not question God’s plan for us. That there is a reason for everything. But is there? Is there a reason that my friend has a terminal illness? Is there a reason for all of this suffering in the world? Are we just supposed to obey and not question? Definitely not. Wrestling and questioning God is being faithful. That we acknowledge that there is a relationship with God. Many of the Psalms are about wrestling with God. Wrestling with the things that happen in our daily lives. We can be angry with God. We can question God’s methods and God’s kingdom.

I am not sure if Coach Gable is a religious man. But look at his actions. He had the fear of being left alone without a family. He saw how all of the circumstances around him were about to bring his fear to a reality. His family was falling apart. I bet he wrestled with God about what to do. Why did this happen to my sister? Why are my parents abusing alcohol? How God could this situation ever change? He confronted the pain of his sister’s death by laying in her bed. He acknowledged the pain. He helped to find them a way to move on. But still that tragedy would be a limp that he will always carry with him.

Being faithful takes work. Being a Christian is not easy. Faith is not just a gift from God. It is a lifelong pursuit of God by us and a pursuit by God of us. It is a give and take. Just like any relationship in our lives, it is not going to be easy. Sometimes all we can do is hang on. We may never get the answers that we seek. But we keep hanging on. Keep wrestling. In spite of those questions and struggles we grow. We get stronger.

After Jacob’s match, he has to prepare for his meeting with Esau. What will it be like? He could have just avoided it. But he keeps forging ahead. When he meets Esau, he expects to be killed, but he is greeted with a hug and a kiss. Maybe that day when he goes to find Esau, he meets God again, in Esau’s face. In the last place he expected, he found God’s grace.

What can we expect from our wrestling with God? We can never know. Keep asking those tough questions. Keep trying to do your best to help your fellow neighbor. Keep hanging on. Keep Wrestling. Amen.

1. http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/\_/page/Dan-Gable/the-losses-dan-gable [↑](#footnote-ref-1)