



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Wrestling with Ourselves

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It's always fun to get to preach about Jacob because he's such a scoundrel, such a vulnerable, real human being. I think he's the most interesting man in the Book of Genesis, if not the whole Old Testament. He wrestles in some form or another all through his story. Jacob is a twin, which means that he was wrapped up and wrestling with another since before birth. Esau came out first, with Jacob immediately following, because he had a grip on Esau's heel, as if trying to slow him down so he could get out ahead of him. Poor Rebekah! As they grew, Esau was an outdoor type, a good hunter, and their father's favorite. Jacob was not, he was more of a thinker, and their mother's favorite. Esau, as the elder, was due to inherit, to receive the father's blessing and birthright. Jacob, who had been apparently waiting since birth to get ahead of his twin, tricked an aging and blind father into conferring the family blessing on him instead of Esau. As one might imagine, this caused a bit of a rift between the brothers. Esau planned to kill his brother as soon as their father was no longer around. Mom learned about it and wisely sent Jacob away. "Go to my brother Laban and stay until it's safe to return". Wrestling match #1.

Jacob did indeed go to Uncle Laban's and promptly fell in love with Rachel. He asked to marry her and Laban, sensing an opportunity told him that if he worked for him for 7 years, he could marry her. 7 years passed and the day of the wedding came, only to see Jacob tricked into marrying Rachel's older sister Leah. Don't ask me how he didn't notice it the next morning. Understandably upset, he storms to Laban and objects. Laban shrugs his shoulders and says, how could I let my younger daughter marry before the elder? You can have Rachel, in another 7 years. Jacob hollers "Uncle!" pinned to the mat. 7 years later, he marries the girl of his dreams. Over the years, Jacob used his smarts to increase the herds and holdings of his father in law. Finally he was ready to leave and go home and struck a deal with Laban about which of the sheep and goats he would take with him. Then Laban tricked him again. Wrestling match number 3.

It took more years but finally Jacob prevailed and took his wives, numerous children, and his own flocks and left. The only problem was that he had to pass through the land of his brother Esau. He is understandably nervous about what Esau might do to him so he disperses his flocks and family and was suddenly alone, in the dark. And of the blue, wham, he is really wrestling with "a man." The words of the story do not identify Jacob's opponent as God, Jacob does that. They wrestle through the night until just daybreak. The man, seeing that Jacob is an accomplished, tenacious wrestler, decides to fight dirty and he dislocates Jacob's hip. But even that will not cause him to lose his grip. Jacob demands a blessing. That seems weird to me. It would make more sense to be asking "who are you and why are you doing this?" At least in Jacob's mind, he is wrestling with God.

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We do not hear the very important next part of the story...Jacob does indeed encounter his brother Esau. Jacob expects wrath and retribution from his brother so he prepares a lavish gift of livestock and goods hoping that it will keep Esau from killing him. What he gets instead is love and forgiveness. Esau was overjoyed to see his brother. One article I read about this story said that Jacob didn't see the face of God in the night as he wrestled. He saw it the next day in his brother's face – the face of love and reconciliation.

All of his life, Jacob has sought and schemed to get a blessing, first one that didn't belong to him, and secondly, from an unknown opponent who had just hurt him. What was he really seeking? It looks to me, as amateur psychologist, that he was craving acceptance and approval. He grew up with a disinterested father. Jacob could think of no way other than trickery to obtain this blessing from Isaac. We are unclear as to what the blessing entailed; there didn't seem to be any sort of change to Isaac's will or some sort of acknowledgment of succession. It just sounds like, some desperate boy standing in front of his father saying, "please tell me that I matter to you."

One of the favorite, oft repeated interpretations of this story of Jacob's wrestling is that, like Luke Skywalker in the swamp finding his own face under Darth Vader's mask, Jacob is wrestling with himself, with his fears, with his own soul. Wrestling is a good metaphor for spiritual journey, the quest for spiritual maturity. Jacob's story is our story of the inner growing up that we all must seek. And Jacob's full story is one that should give us all hope, for he falls short, time and time again but he remains God's beloved. That plaintive primal cry, "tell me that I'm ok, that I'm enough" is, I believe, what we all wrestle with.

Growing up physically, learning to walk and talk, learning to share and play with others, learning to go out into the world on our own, is easy stuff compared with growing up emotionally and spiritually, once you're already an adult. You have to be willing to do hard work, to dig deep into your motivations, do your emotional archeology, and you must be prepared to wrestle with your demons. God and life will give you the opportunities for such work.

What does that look like – well, lots of things...it can be everything from forgiving yourself for your less than shining moments – that's a big old wrestling match. It can also be learning to forgive those who have wronged or hurt you. Forgiveness is not weakness, it is a powerful thing, and not for the faint-hearted. To get to forgiveness is to wrestle with your sense of outrage, your desire to see someone punished, and your sense of loss. If you can successfully wrestle all of these things to the ground, a future of freedom opens up for you. All of the wrestling earns you the power to determine your own future, because you are no longer controlled by something that you have dragged with you from in the past.

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In this election season, spiritually mature people will be wrestling with lots of questions. What does my choice say about what I believe in? Right now we all have to wrestle with the media that are bringing us their own spin on what is going on. What kind of sources do you seek out and to what standard do you hold them. We must be willing to wrestle with our own predispositions and pre-judgments and ask hard, probing questions. We as Episcopalians have a tool to help us with this. It's called our Baptismal Covenant in which we commit ourselves to working for justice, freedom, and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. Get into the ring with those concepts and your choice. Be willing to wrestle with how you will react to the outcome of this election.

Jacob wrestled often with his own sense of self-worth. He didn't trust that he could be valued for his own sake so he tricked his father. He didn't trust his value as a man and husband enough to challenge Laban when he ended up married to the wrong girl. He let himself be bullied. And he never trusted that he could be loved just for himself. That is, until he received the greatest blessing of his brother's tearful greeting. He was forgiven, loved, and free and he didn't have to trick anybody for it. He didn't have to wrestle with Esau to get him to do anything. For once in his life, Jacob was realized that he was loved without having earned it. He was loved in spite of his dishonesty and the hurt he caused. In Esau's embrace, he was just the long lost brother. The lovable scoundrel won the match of his life, even though it knocked him flat.

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