



BIRMINGHAM FIRST
A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

I'm Still Growing:
"WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT CHRISTIAN GROWTH!"

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The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me!" So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32:22-31)

When I was in high school, I was never a fan of wrestling. I had my reasons. I had great pity for my friends who were starving themselves in order to make their weight before a match. Sometimes they would go with little food for days, or spend immense efforts trying to sweat weight off. They'd often go into their matches with so little energy I couldn't imagine they could win, but often opponents were no better off than they. I still remember sitting up part of a night with a friend whose asthma was aggravated by the dietary demands of his sport. I was not enamored with wrestling.

Still, wrestling is revered as one of the oldest of all sports. Numerous countries send their wrestlers to the Olympics today, and wrestling was one of the most popular sports with the ancient Greeks who first held the Olympian games. This ancient story from Genesis reminds us that wrestling is far, far older than even the country of Greece.

I think the reason that wrestling has persisted so long is that it's a very personal sport. Yes, you're part of a team, but when it gets down to it, you are matched against just one opponent that you've got to rub into the mat. I do understand why that has great appeal. It's a one-on-one contest, a "Come on, just you and me: let's just get down to it and see who's going to win!" type of mentality. Wrestling is a sport where you can't hide. It's a "let's have it out once and for all" confrontation. You put away all your excuses and hype and jump into the fray.

This is why I think this scripture is one of the grand passages in all the Bible. This is the reason why the great Charles Wesley could write more than seven thousand hymns, yet many consider his greatest to be the beautiful hymn we just sang in which he pictures himself as Jacob wrestling all night with God. This is a story that happened once upon a time. But it is also a mythic prototype that repeats itself in every dark night of the soul, for each one of us. It is the story of Israel, Jacob's heirs, the people of God, the Jews. And it is the story of Jesus, Jesus' heirs, the people of God, the Christians. Yes, this is *our* story, too, because to grow beyond our failing, fallen, sinful selves, we must wrestle.

One thing I can tell you about growing as a disciple of Christ it is this: the life of faith is one long wrestling match. We journey through this life in search of the promise, scrambling to find our way, using our wits (such as they are) just to get by, burning our bridges or trying to rebuild them, making a mess of our relationships. Somewhere during one long night or maybe several along the way, we wrestle with ourselves, with the angels and the demons of our nature, with our failures, our flaws, our family blessings and curses, our guilt, our shame, our fears, our grief, our gains, our losses.

And here and there, now and then, we are ambushed by God with surprising grace, opportunity, and blessing. The Stranger will not let you go. Like Jacob, you will be wounded, have something thrown out of joint. But if you keep wrestling, hang tough, refuse to let go, you will be blessed. Call it faith, call it prayer, call it the sacred journey, call it God—this is our own story, too. And our destiny as a people. Perhaps we can see ourselves there, as well, for Methodists have always been wrestlers.

You remember Jacob's story, don't you? Jacob was the second born of twins. He was born holding on to the heel of his older brother Esau, so they called Jacob "The Grabber"—a good wrestler's name. More than twenty years have passed since Jacob stole father Isaac's blessing from his brother Esau and ran away from his brother's rage. During those years, Jacob got a family and a small fortune. I think he hoped that by this time his brother Esau might have forgiven the stolen blessing. But here in this passage he's about to run into Esau and he's shaking in his boots. He sends messengers ahead to Esau with gifts, flocks of sheep, and conciliatory communications, but they return with word that Esau was coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. Finally Jacob sends his wives and children ahead of him to Esau. Some commentators say that he sent them across the river for safety, but in truth Jacob sent them ahead to serve as a buffer between Esau and himself.

What do I know about growth in the Christian faith? First, the life of faith is one long wrestling match. God's nature is such that God is not content to see us go to our destruction. God is not content to see us stagnate as the rotten, self-righteous scoundrels we can be. God is very willing

to confront us, to take us on “one on one,” to challenge us to change, just as he did with Jacob. We had better be aware that God will meet us, contend with us, wrestle with us through all our long nights, and will not let us get away with being less than we can be. You should know this: God will chase you down and is eager to go to the mat with you.

Second, I also know this: it takes two to tango. Our spiritual wrestling is like taking on two opponents at the same time. We must contend with God, but we must also wrestle with ourselves. Here at the ford of the Wadi Jabbok, God has finally caught up with Jacob, who really doesn’t understand what it meant that he stole his brother’s blessing. Jacob is forced to wrestle with this Stranger. But Jacob is also wrestling with himself. He is finally confronting himself and his nature, with how he’s stolen and deceived and manipulated his way through life. In order to grow, Jacob is contending not only with this Stranger, but with himself.

To use a good old expression, Jacob was “under conviction.” Have you ever been “under conviction”? It means that God’s spirit is beginning to stir inside you, and you are starting to wrestle with who you are and who you ought to be. Mouzon Biggs was the long-time pastor of our 9,000-member Boston Avenue United Methodist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and he talks about the old-time revivals he knew. As a boy he participated in summertime revivals in his small church, sitting in the pew, watching the preachers, listening to the singers. Then at age 18, he had just become a preacher, and he decided to hold an old-time, hot summer revival. So he invited the preacher from his parents’ church to come and hold a July revival meeting.

“First night,” he said, “we got into the service. The preacher ended his sermon with a very moving story. Got us into the invitational hymn, we sang four verses, we’re coming to the end and he leans over to me and whispers ‘Don’t let them stop. There’s a man here under conviction.’ I’d never heard that expression before. I didn’t know what he meant, but I knew to keep singing. He was saying, ‘Keep singing, there’s a somebody here under conviction.’”

“The next day I asked him, ‘What did you mean by that?’ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘There was a man in the third pew. I could see in his eyes that God was dealing with him. God was dealing with him and I didn’t want to stop until he had time to respond. And he did.’”

Jacob was a man “under conviction.” He’s awaking to the reality of God and he’s facing his Judgment Day. He fears that vengeful brother Esau is going to stomp him with his four hundred men, and wives and children and kin and slaves and the great riches of his flocks are all going to be slaughtered. And now, left alone, he’s dealing with himself.

The life of faith is one lifelong wrestling match. God is going to come after us until we finally wrestle with ourselves and what we’ve done with our lives, and then we wrestle with what God would make of us. And here’s the point: we only grow when we are willing to wrestle with God and with ourselves. And we’re wrestling for God’s blessing. If we’re content with the amount of spiritual understanding we received when we were in third grade or twelfth grade, we live stunted lives. We wrestle because faith is more than simply saying we believe something—we must wrestle to really understand what we say we believe. We are called to wrestle to reach greater clarity in faith and understanding. And when we do, God will bless us as surely as God blessed Jacob at the Wadi Jabbok. God doesn’t want us to roll over and pretend in our faith.

And, third, I'll tell you this: if God has a wrestler's name, it is The Stranger. God comes to us in ways we don't expect. At first you may well not know with whom you are wrestling. Do you have sleepless nights? Are you agonizing over direction? Are you discontented with how you've been living this precious life? I've never met a mature Christian person who is so totally content with their life that they've not had to contend with regrets, shame, having injured others, even those they love, and their sinful nature. But when this happens, know that it's more than guilt. It's because God wants you to grow. God often comes to us as The Stranger.

With an extreme economy of words, the narrative says, "A man struggled with Jacob 'til the break of day." The biblical writer reports it very matter-of-factly, as if we should have known that such a thing would happen. And I think that any of us who are sensitive to the struggles of the human soul are not surprised. Of course Jacob wrestled that night. Of course he would be confronted by an unknown traveler. We knew he would because we ourselves have gone through such a night at our own Jabbok ford, where we have encountered that strange wrestler.

Jacob was what old western movies would call a "tough little hombre." This stranger should have beaten him easily, but true to his name, Jacob, the Grabber, held on. At the last the stranger took advantage of his superior powers: he struck the hollow of Jacob's thigh so that it withered. Jacob was now a poor, limping thing, bracing on one leg, the other half-helpless. But he would not let go.

"The day is breaking!" the Stranger says, "Now let me go!" But Jacob the wrestler, the perspiring, limping, wheezing heel grabber, answers, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" He's wrestlin' for blessing.

"Tell me your name!" the Stranger demands. And Jacob thinks to himself, "You don't need for me to tell you. It's easy to see that I'm Jacob, the Grabber." Nevertheless, he said it; for there comes a time in the wrestling of the soul when we have to name ourselves, look hard at ourselves, or we can never be anything else.

And the Stranger says, "No longer Jacob. From now on, Israel. You are a Prince, a Striver-With-God. And you have prevailed." Jacob has been given a new life—been born anew, one might say—so the Stranger christens him on spot, with a new name worthy of his new prospects: Prince and Striver-With-God!

With all his heart Jacob needed to know if God would be with him when the morning broke and in all the days to come. God has told him to return to the home of his people, yet Jacob knows that Esau is waiting with four hundred men for him. "God. Where are you sending me? Are you sending me to my death? Are you sending me back into the hands of Esau who has pledged to twist my neck from my shoulders? Lord, will you be with me?" So Jacob is wrestling over whether God can be trusted. God has promised to be with him, yet God is sending him into the very shadow of death: "Lord, will you be with me?" It's an answer we all wish to have. Ultimately we're all wrestling for this blessing, and the answer comes only when we go to the mat with God.

The great Hebrew scholar Martin Buber said something toward the end of his life that touched me greatly. He was commenting on that powerful scene in the Book of Exodus where God appears to Moses in the Burning Bush. Remember in that passage Moses asks God: “What is your name?” God answers: “I am who I am.”

Martin Buber, after studying that Hebrew text for his entire life, said that he had come to the conclusion that we have mistranslated those words. He said that instead of the name of God being translated “I am who I am” that it should read “I shall be there as I shall be there.” Martin Buber said the name of God comes from a dynamic verb, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which is “I shall be there.”¹

Martin Buber believed this passage was saying that when you have to face the Pharaohs of life, the name of God is “I shall be there. I shall be there for you.” God promises that God will always be present, but not in any known or expected form.

Jacob knew he was wrestling for God’s blessing. Certainly John and Charles Wesley knew of the sport. John believed that every Christian needs to wrestle with God, and when they do they receive the blessing of knowing God’s peace, that God will always be with them, even in the moment of their death. When you are scared or lonely or depressed, the name of God is “I shall be there with you.” When you face sickness or heartache or even death, the name of God is “I shall be there with you.”

When you have to go to a cross, the name of God is “I shall be there.”

When you are laid out in a tomb, the name of God is “I shall be there.”

And when Easter morning comes, the name of God is “I shall be there.”

Jacob wrestled because, like you and me, he needed to know whether God would be with him or desert him when he met his brother. And when Jacob left that spot, he named the place *Peni-el*, which means “God’s face.” He declared, “I have seen God face-to-face, and yet I am alive.” Alive, indeed. He was the most alive he had ever been. He was twice-alive. He was re-named, and re-born. He was a different person in the morning than he was the night before.

There is something this writer wants you to know, and Charles Wesley wants you to know, and I wish to tell you as well. The blessing Jacob received is available to you and to all. And, above all else, it is to be sought. For it’s possible to have everything else in life and still be among the “living dead” if you do not know the liberating blessing of God’s saving grace. It is worth wrestling for.

This is a story that happened once upon a time. But it is also a mythic prototype that repeats itself in every dark night of the soul, for each one of us. Why must we wrestle? Because grace is freely given, but it is not cheap. You must seek it and struggle to grow into it, to make room for it in your life, and to realize that God means it for you. That’s why we wrestle.

God wasn't content with Jacob and his meager faith. And God isn't content with the condition of your faith or mine. I'm know I'm still growing, but I do know this: God is calling us to wake up and start wrestling. For every growing Christian is a wrestler. It's an all-comers match and God will take your best and your worst so long as you'll *engage* God, *wrestle* God, and refuse to let go until God blesses you.

May you wrestle until you stand up in the dawn with the assurance in your heart that you've seen God face-to-face. And, like Jacob, know not only that your life was spared, but that the eternal God of our mothers and fathers is with you. And that the nature and the name of this God is love.

It's worth wrestling for, my friends. God wrestles with us before we even know God's name. We wrestle with our sins and doubts until God's grace transforms us. Then we wrestle for a better life, for ourselves and for all the world. And we do it with a leap and a laugh. Hell, earth and sin are all o'ercome. We belong to the One whose nature and whose name is love.

Let us pray...

'Tis Love! 'Tis Love! Thou diedst for me,
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
pure Universal Love thou art.
To me, to all, thy mercies move, thy nature and thy name is Love.
To me, to all, thy mercies move; thy nature and thy name is Love.

¹. Exodus 3:14