

**Sermon: “The Battle of Peniel”**  
**Scripture: Genesis 32:22-32**  
**Pastor Aaron Holley**  
**Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church**  
**www.rumc.org**  
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Some of my fondest memories growing up took place in the little hallway of our parsonage where we grew up. This a small little hallway and right down the middle of the hallway was this huge ventilation air return grid. The grid made it difficult if my brother, Matt, and I wanted to wrestle around or run through the house because it was easy to get hurt on that grate. So my mom and dad bought this huge pillow. I cannot explain to you how big this thing was—it was nearly three foot in diameter, a massive pillow—and every day it never failed. We would drag that thing in the hallway and cover the grate just so that we could ‘wrassle.’ (Yes, I said ‘wrassle.’) See, there is ‘wrestling’ and then there is ‘wrassling,’ and Matt and I “wrassled”.

But here was the thing—no matter how much we meant to stay calm and cordial and have fun and just wrestle around, it always turned into a fight. It never failed because my little brother always got hurt and that is just the way it was, he could not help it. It really was not a fair fight—if you look at my brother and you look at me, you notice very quickly we are not built the same. That was even more obvious when we were growing up because my little brother was taller and really thin and wiry. So when we would wrestle, it really was not fair— in the beginning, I could never catch him. The good news for me was WHEN I caught him, I would grab him, throw him to the ground and sit on him—game over, I win. It was great—it was not a fair wrestling match, but that is just the way it was and I did not mind it so much.

This passage of Scripture that was read for us this morning is an account of probably one of the most amazing wrestling matches in the history of mankind. Before we get to that, I want to give you a little background—a little history—as to what led to this passage in Genesis chapter 32. You see, Jacob—the man in the story, the man who is wrestling in this passage scripture—is the grandson of Abraham. And Abraham was the man of which God promised, “I will make a great nation out of you”. When he was very old, Abraham and his wife had the miracle son Isaac; and Isaac grew up and married Rebekah, and the two of them became pregnant with twins.

The oldest of these twins, Esau, came out first; and literally right on his heel, holding on to his heel, came Jacob. Scripture tells us that long before they ever were birthed, they were wrestling in the womb. This was a fighting match—a grudge match—between brothers unlike any ever seen. That fight continued as they grew up—day after day—because Scripture tells us that Isaac loved Esau more than he did Jacob; and his mother, Rebekah, loved Jacob more. It became a family rivalry that began to escalate and escalate and escalate. It grew so intense that eventually, at one point, Jacob—whose name means ‘schemer’—came up with a plan to rob his brother—steal from his brother— from the birthright that was rightfully due him.

Jacob did just that—he tricked his brother into giving that up. Then later on down the road when Isaac, his father, was very old and poor of sight, he tricked his own dad into blessing him with the blessing that he was supposed to give Esau. Of course, this angered Esau so much that he had determined in his own heart that he would kill his little brother. His mom caught wind of that and, not wanting that

to happen, sent Jacob running away from the house in the middle of the night to live with her brother, Laban, his uncle. For twenty years, he lived with Laban. He was married, had a family, had multiple livestock and here we find—in Genesis 32, twenty years later—Jacob is on the road back home.

The problem is, in the process of coming back home, he learns that big brother is close—the big brother who he had robbed and cheated and schemed out of everything that belonged to him—and he brought 400 men with him. Now, I do not know about you, but if I had been Jacob I would have been petrified. I would have felt like it was time to pay the piper. That is what Jacob did; and so scared for his life and wanting to preserve his family, he sent all of them away to the other side of Jabbok. Now alone, we find him in this passage of Scripture in Genesis where he wrestles all night long with a man. It is confusing if you just read he is wrestling with a man—is he wrestling with an angel? Is he wrestling with God? To clear that up, all we have to do is look at the prophet Hosea and chapter 12 where Hosea says, “That night, Jacob wrestled with the Lord God all powerful.”

All night long Jacob is in a struggle for his life because he does not know with whom he is wrestling—it is pitch black, it is dark, and all he knows is there is someone there fighting him. For all he knows, it could be one of Esau’s henchmen—it could have been anyone. He did not know who it was—all he knew was he was in a battle for his life, and he was going to fight to stay alive. Scripture tells us that just before God—who we know as God—looks at Jacob and says “Man, it’s almost morning. Let me go, I’m going to go. I’m going to leave.” Now I have been in many wrestling matches, and I have been in some lengthy ones. I will tell you this much—after a few minutes, I am worn out. I cannot even fathom wrestling all night long, let alone wrestling with God—you talk about not fair.

When God said, “Hey, let me go, I’m going to leave, I’m going to get out of here,” if I would have been Jacob, I would have felt... (sigh)... get me an oxygen mask, get me some water, get out of here, I want to relax. But Jacob does not do that—you see, somewhere over the course of the night in this wrestling match, he must have started to figure out what was going on here. He must have begun to get a glimpse that this was more than just a man—this was God, and he was determined not to let go until God gave him what he came there to give him. So when God said, “Let me go, it’s morning, I’m going to get out of here,” Jacob grabbed hold of him and said, “I will not let you go until you bless me”. God did that, and we find out in later chapters that—when Jacob finally met up with Esau— instead of there being a massive battle and a massive war, there was restoration and healing that began to take place between the brothers.

Thinking about this passage, preparing for this weekend, it reminded me that we all are wrestling with someone or something—work, co-workers, family members. If we are honest, maybe we are wrestling with that very person who we see in the mirror every morning. We are wrestling for a purpose, we are wrestling for hope, we are wrestling for some peace, we are wrestling for some guidance and—if we are really honest with ourselves—many of us on many different occasions in our life are wrestling with God over very, very big things. If Jacob were really honest with himself, he would have realized he had been wrestling with God a long time before he ever came face to face with Him. What started out as a wrestling match with his brother back long ago, having robbed and cheated Esau of the blessing of the birthright, had now become a wrestling match with God because now—being the blessed son—he would be the one from whom God would make a great nation and fulfill the covenant with Abraham. This inner turmoil must have been ripping apart at who Jacob was. His entire life wrestling with who he was and what he was going

to do.

We all wrestle with someone or something, and my hunch is—in a room this size full of this many people—there are many of us even now wrestling with God over something. There are few things in this passage of Scripture that I think are really important for us to really pull out of this if we are going to ever learn how to wrestle well. The first thing is this: authenticity is vital in our face-to-face meetings with God. What do I mean by that? Here in this one little passage of Scripture, God asked Jacob a question in the midst of this wrestling match, “What is your name? Who are you?” This seems like a simple question—it does not seem like it is that complicated. If you think for a moment of what Jacob’s name meant—schemer, deceiver, fighter—to actually say your name, to actually admit to who were, that was a big deal. In fact, Jacob had been running from who he was for 20 years. He had been trying to leave that behind, trying to start anew in Laban’s family, trying to leave the past behind; and here in this moment as he is face to face with God, he has a decision to make. He can either choose to be honest with God, or he can put up a wall—a façade—and pretend to be somebody he was not.

Now, we never do that—we never hide behind a fake smile, we never hide behind walls, we never pretend to be somebody we are not, we never pretend that everything is okay when problems are raging inside. We do not struggle with that like Jacob does, do we? The truth is we are all going to be wrestling with God at some point, and it would do us very well to remember that authenticity—being real with God in those moments that we come face to face with him—is absolutely important. You see, it is in that moment when Jacob looked at God and said, “I’m Jacob”. He was saying more than a name—he was saying, “I am scum of the earth, I am evil, I am wicked, I am vial, I’m a schemer, I’m a liar, I’m a cheater, I am Jacob.”

I think sometimes it would do us good to come before God face to face and be very real and just say, “I’m Aaron, I make a lot of mistakes, I screw things up more than I get it right. I’m a sinner, I make this thing harder than it should be. I’m Aaron”. You realize God did not bless Jacob until Jacob was first willing to be real and honest with God. I wonder if it possible that God has been waiting to bless you and I, but he is just waiting for us to come face to face with him and say, “This is me—no facade, no walls—just me”. Not only was Jacob authentic and completely real with God in this moment, he was relentless; do you know why? Because determination is a huge part of our faith and our desire for what God has for us. It is all about being determined; the problem is you and I would probably have not held onto God when he gave us an out. In fact, many of us most of the time would say that we take every out we can get.

The truth is God was not giving him an out because He was tired; make no mistake about it—God was still all powerful. God was not tired, God was not saying, “Let me go, I want to go get some sleep.” I often wonder why God did not just end that quick—why did God not just kick his feet out from under him and sit on him like I did my little brother? He could have done that, right? You know why he did not do that? I believe he did not do that because He realized that he was going to make himself vulnerable for the sake of Jacob and wrestle Jacob on his own terms; and as long as Jacob was willing to wrestle, He was willing to wrestle with Jacob. I wonder what that would mean for us. When troubles come—when we are completely worn out, when we are spiritually empty, the tank is completely dry and we do not feel like we have anything left—what do we do when that happens? Do we give up? Do we throw up our hands and quit? Or do we do what Jacob did and grab hold of God with all that we have and say, “I am not letting go until You bless me—until You have come to do what You have told me You were going to do?” See, that is faith.

Sometimes we think that faith is easy—faith is supposed to come easy. The truth is that real faith happens when we are just clinging on to God with all that we have because we have nothing else to do. But, you know, I think many of us get it really messed up and think it is not okay to wrestle with God. I mean He is God, and I am not supposed to fight with God—I will lose. Yeah, well you might; but there is an important thing we need to remember. There is a big difference between questioning God and wrestling with him. See, questioning God means I know what is best. Wrestling with God says I just want to know what is best. Questioning God looks at God and says, “What are You doing? You don’t know what You’re doing—I know what I am doing”. Wrestling with God says, “I don’t have a clue what I’m doing and I’m not leaving until you show me and I could figure it out.”

The problem is many of us get that mixed up, and we get really good at questioning God, don’t we? “What do you think you are doing God? This isn’t cool! This does not fit my plan. This does not make sense to me. You must be off your rocker.” See, that is not okay; but it is more than okay to wrestle with God. In fact, not only is it okay to wrestle with God, first Peter chapter five, verse seven says he wants us to wrestle with Him. That passage says, “Cast all your cares upon Him because He cares for you.” The Greek word for ‘casting’ literally means ‘to throw down.’ Now where I grew up, if you were going to ‘throw down’—throw the gloves off, let’s go, it’s a throw down, bring it on—we are going to drop everything, we are going to stop everything and fix this problem right now, one-on-one. It is a ‘throw down.’

Guess what? God is okay with that. God is not afraid of you. God is not intimidated by me. God is not freaked out when I say, “I don’t know what else to do—come on, I need to talk to you”. He is not saying, “Oooh, he seems angry.” I do not think so. God is not freaked out by us; in fact, God says, “Good—maybe we will get some business done today”. He is ready to ‘throw down’—He is ready to cast all of His cares upon me. I am going to throw down, and I am going to wrestle as long as He needs to wrestle, and I am going to like it because it is okay for you and I to wrestle with God—Jacob did.

Do you know why is it not only okay, but a beautiful thing when we wrestle with God? Because it is impossible for us to come face to face with God and leave unchanged. It is impossible—think about the massive amounts of change that took place in this story. The place where Jacob showed up here was a place called Jabbok, and Jabbok literally means ‘a place to stir up dust.’ When he left, he changed that name to Peniel—which means ‘the face of God.’ When Jacob showed up that day, Jacob’s name was ‘Jacob’—which meant schemer, fighter. When he left, his name was changed to Israel which means ‘God prevails.’ When Jacob came into that night, he came healthy, he came whole and he came full of pride; and when he left, he left with a limp and a huge source of humility because of what God had done. When Jacob showed up that night, as far as he was concerned, the next time he saw Esau his life would be over; instead, when he left and finally met up with Esau, there was love and healing and restoration. It is impossible for you and I to come face to face with God in an authentic way determined full of faith and leave unchanged.

I do not know about you, but if that means God is going to change me for the better, then I want to wrestle all the time; because the beautiful thing about this wrestling thing with God is to wrestle with God you have to come face to face with Him; and when you come face to face with Him, that is when real transformation takes place. That is when real work gets done. The problem is I think many of us expect God to do His work when worship is great, when life is ‘hunky-dory,’ when we are really feeling the Spirit and avoid or look for opportunities to get out of a wrestling

match with God because it is uncomfortable, because it means we have to get real, it means we have to come face to face with God and admit who we are—and that is not easy.

All I know is this—Jacob was wrestling that night for his life, and when he realized with whom he was wrestling, he was wrestling for a life transformation. He said, “God, I am not letting go until You do what you came here to do in my life.” Now I do not have a clue what all is going on in your life today. I do not know where you are at on your spiritual journey. It is possible that there are many in this room who have never even begun their spiritual journey. You may have never come face to face with God. Maybe it is time to wrestle. There are probably some of you in this room who have been on the journey for a long time, but you have hit some road blocks—you have arrived a place where you are just struggling with something—maybe it is a hurt or a pain, maybe it is an area where you need to learn forgiveness, maybe it is some healing that needs to take place, physically or emotionally or spiritually.

Maybe it is time to wrestle; maybe you are sitting there and you know it is time for you to finally get real with God and quit worrying about the smile or the facade that you are going to put on to cover up all the hurt, anger and bitterness. Maybe it is time you just come before God and throw it down. He is ready for that, He longs for that and I promise you—when you authentically come face to face with a God who loves you more than anyone else in this world, you will leave forever changed. Just ask Jacob.