

Ron Gilmer
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL
3 August 2008

Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ the Lord. Amen.

WRESTLING AND LIMPING

GENESIS 32:22-31

The stage was set in the beginning. Not “in the beginning,” as in the first chapter of Genesis, but in the beginning of Jacob’s story---before it actually---when Jacob and Esau are sparring inside of Rebekah’s womb. First Jacob tussles with his brother; now he wrestles with God. Somewhere along the way, we, as a nation and culture, have forgotten the value of wrestling by reducing it to a form of entertainment, on the one hand, or by becoming even more violent---to the point of annihilation--- with one another on the other hand.

Thanks be to God that Jacob wrestles. He wrestles with himself, his brother and with anybody who stands in between him and the fulfillment of his dreams. By wrestling, he is disheveled yet improved, and by the end of this Genesis story, he understands that one is intimately related to the other; wrestling is intimately related to limping and limping to the actualization of one’s dreams. Jacob does not limp because he falls off of a ladder but because he wrestles with one who grants him the capacity to climb, the capacity to dream.

The linguist in me is attracted to the language of “wrestling.” Is “wrestling” a gerund, a verb or an adjective? Any word that ends in “-ing” is a gerund, right? That is what Mrs. Kirby taught me in eighth grade; and to say that Jacob is wrestling (with Esau or God) suggests action. This is what Jacob is doing; but what if it is his vocation? What if he is truly “wrestling Jacob”? This not only describes a

particular behavior; it says something about who Jacob is. No matter where Jacob is or who he is with, he will be wrestling.

Soon after I arrived in Tuscaloosa (or was it shortly before?), Paige Miller passed along a book by Erskine Clarke and published by the University of Alabama Press called *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in Antebellum Georgia and the Carolina Low Country*. Clarke serves as professor of American religious history and director of international programs at Columbia Theological Seminary (where Erica Durham interviewed this past week). This particular narrative is framed by the words of a Negro spiritual: "O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob day's a-breakin'; I will not let thee go! O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin'; He will not let me go! O, I hold my brudder wid a tremblin' hand; I would not let him go! I hold my sister wid a tremblin' hand; I would not let her go! O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb, he would not let him go! O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb, De Lord will bless my soul." Who is the "I" in the first sentence of this song: God or Esau? The next sentence trades the "I" for a "he," which is followed by the lament: "I hold my brudder wid a tremblin' hand." So either Jacob is either swinging from Esau's heel to God, cleverly disguised as a man, or he is tormented by the memory of a brother swindled. The story is complex and powerful enough to be woven into the spirituality of a people who suffer the indignities of slavery and yet survive as Africans while becoming something else: Christians and Americans.

In the beginning, Jacob is a trickster, and this theme is visited again and again as he interacts with Isaac, Rebekah and Esau. This trickster, by blessing or curse, inherits the responsibility first conferred on Abraham: to bless all families of the earth through him. The trickster thus becomes a people and a nation. He is renamed Israel. His story is thoroughly Jewish and beautifully human. Jacob's intellectual pursuits are almost indistinguishable from his spiritual pursuits, as God creates and recreates him to wrestle. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Scriptures through which God forms Christ himself, God calls covenant people to be political inasmuch as God calls them---and us---to be

pastoral: to serve one another as Christ serves us. In this nation's history, the call to be political has translated into working toward emancipation and civil rights. Both belong to a genre of service---human rights---that transcends religious and political labels that looks and feels like loving one's neighbor as oneself.

A story came to me in an e-mail week-before-last about a preacher, a priest and a rabbi who chose to begin ministering to bears. In the next scene, they are in a physician's office. The priest, bandaged and standing with crutches, explains that the bear did not take to the catechism so he baptized him, and now the bear is a communicant. The preacher, sitting in a wheelchair, mumbles something about sprinkling being insufficient before bragging that he wrestled a bear into a river, and now the bear is saved, sanctified and washed by the blood of the Lamb. The rabbi, in a body cast and being fed intravenously, grumbles first to himself and then to the group, "Looking back on it, circumcision may have not been the best way to start." To whom much is given much is expected. Or as Tevye complains to God in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "We are your chosen people, but once in a while, can't you choose someone else?" Thanks to Linda Grote for the story. May God forgive me for using Internet-based circumcision humor in church!

Jacob wrestles not with a bear, but with God...and he prevails. Maybe this story is one that shapes Jesus' radical idea that life is found only in one's willingness to lose it. Jacob's life does not belong to him; and given that he is traveling with two wives, two maids and eleven children, I doubt that he would disagree (by the way, notice that Jacob's definition of marriage is not very American or Presbyterian). At last they arrive on the other side of the Jabbok, and there is silence. An omniscient narrator sets the stage for the next scene by stating mysteriously that, "Jacob was left alone." Then a man appears. At this point in the story, all we are told is that Jacob is wrestling a man, not God or an angel, but another human being, flesh and bone, like you and me. Jacob's hip socket snaps as they wrestle into the middle of the night, but apparently, we should see the other person, because Scripture

is clear: Jacob prevails. His body entangled with Jacob's, the man speaks: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob argues. "No," he says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

"Unless I bless you," the man replies. "Who are you anyway?" The person with whom Jacob has wrestled all night does not know Jacob's name. Or if he does, he feels that it is important that Jacob say it out loud. Then there is the first clue that this is not just anybody; the person with whom Jacob has been wrestling may very well be God. In renaming Jacob Israel, the man reveals to Jacob that he has "striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." At the lectionary study on Tuesday, I asked, "What does it mean to prevail against God?" Then I confessed that I have not had that experience. Since then, it occurs to me that I may have neglected the prepositions in this statement. For example, "against" does not appear in this dialogue. The language is "with." Jacob prevails, because he strives "with" God and humans, not against them. By now, it seems clear to Jacob that this has not been any other night. This experience has been life-changing, extraordinary. Still, he asks, "Please tell me your name," which to me, is almost as absurd as this man, whom Scripture implies is God, asking Jacob his name after they wrestle all night. The man answers Jacob's question with a question, then blesses him. No name is given, only a blessing. Jacob concludes, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Then he limps away. Prevailing, at least in this story, is intimately related to being preserved.

May God forgive any effort to romanticize limping, to glorify disability! I am increasingly convinced that everyone is disabled on some level; it is just some disabilities are more visible, intrusive and/or off-putting to others. For me, the limp is an invitation to slow down, to observe, to contemplate and to wrestle. No, it is not something that I chose anymore than you chose whatever it is that nags at you, but it is something with which I strive quite literally. It is interesting to me how one's disability colors his or her understanding of God, self and neighbor (not always in that order). One of the angriest people I have ever met has a son with a disability. He is so ashamed of his son that he rarely takes him

out in public, and he projects his anger on to those with obvious disabilities who thrive in social situations. I have often thought, "What if this person invested all that he does in hating in something else like practicing compassion or simply letting go?" Maybe, by God's grace in Jesus Christ, he will.

It is that "striving against," against God, against one's self, against one's neighbor that corrupts the soul. Hatred begets hatred at home and throughout the world. I pray that you will always be a person who "strives with," and in so striving, will feel at home with yourself, with God and with your neighbor. I pray that we will be a congregation who strives with those who wrestle so that we, like Jacob, will see God face-to-face in the flesh and bone of another human being: Jesus the Christ. As God has gathered us this morning to worship, as God has gathered us to pray, let us strive with those whom God is gathering at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church in Knoxville today. For the lives of those who died as they worshiped, we give thanks; for those who commit crimes in opposition to the rights of every human being, we pray, "Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer." For such as these, for you and for me, for all who limp, Christ died and lives now and always. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.