

Genesis 32:22-32  
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“Faith and Wrestling”

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This past week I had the joy of exchanging a few messages with someone very dear to many of you. Rev. Ineka Mitchell. Living in Connecticut now, one of her jobs is training clergy in the art of Intentional Interim Ministry. Rev. Mitchell came to this congregation at a tender moment of transition. During our exchanges, I told her how she was still loved by Emanuel, and her faithful leadership still appreciated by many in this congregation. She responded, “Wow...it was my first interim. They were wonderfully receptive to the work that needed to be done. And they did it well with love and grace. I have wonderful memories of our time together. Please send them my love.”

Today in Genesis we meet Jacob. Christian Author Frederick Buechner writes, “The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was, among other things, a crook.

Twice he cheated his brother, Esau, out of what was coming to him. At least once he took advantage of the blindness of his Father, Isaac. He outdid his double-crossing father-in-law, Laban, by conning him out of most of his livestock and, later when Laban wasn't looking, sneaking off with not only both the man's daughters but just about everything else that wasn't nailed down.

Many Christians have been taught Jacob's name means 'deceiver.' Other research suggests, it doesn't mean 'deceiver,' but means “one who grabs hold, or grasper,” named for the iron grip he had on his twin brother's heel when they were born. It seems at times Jacob was tempted to grasp things that were not rightly his.

We might wonder if this history is catching up to Jacob today? The Bible Wrestling Federation has come to town and his opponent is none other than God. Of course, he doesn't know at first it is God. But when he finds out it is God he grabs hold. This is what all of us do when we find ourselves caught in a struggle, we grasp for God, and then we ask God to bless us.

During the wrestling match, Jacob gets a new name, “Israel” which means “God is reliable,” that is better than being known as, “The Grasper.” Secondly, Jacob gets a blessing. But he also ended up with a permanent disability that would mark his body, and mark his people's eating habits for many centuries to come. The wrestling match ended before full daylight because everyone knew the scripture that said if a person sees God face to face, they will die.

As disciples, we are people who claim God guides our life. We seek to live God's way. There are various paths which lead one to a desire to live in God: Maybe you have experienced God's comfort in times of great sorrow which brought you back to life. Maybe you have been set free by God's love from addiction or cycles of violence to yourself, or others. Maybe you have been released from the bonds of sin by God's forgiveness, or restored by redemption after a mistake, or a poor decision. Maybe you have been touched by God's courage to face your fear and were

carried through. Maybe you have been healed by God's hand in great or small ways and given your life to God. Maybe you have rejoiced and discovered the God of all is beside you full of joy in your moment of celebration. These are all very expected and acceptable paths by which we grow in God.

But one lesson of today's story is God does not always come to us in ways we expect or accept. God came to Jacob as a member of the Biblical Wrestling Federation. Ready for the bell to sound so the two could square off in the ring to see how strong Jacob's discipleship really was. Jacob, by staying in the ring as dawn begins to break risks his life for the sake of this blessing.

When I answered my call to ministry, God came to me as a Ton of Bricks. Not literally but it felt that way. It was the summer before my junior year in college. I still wasn't sure what to do with my life. I was a counselor at a United Church of Christ Camp in Missouri. We had brought 100 inner city children out into a rural camp to learn about God's creation, to learn skills for survival, and to pray and study Scriptures.

It was over half way through the summer and in the intersection of those two worlds, urban and rural, I was pondering my life's work -- Teacher? Counselor? Social worker? I had a lot of ideas but none of them really took hold in me. One afternoon, I was half asleep on my cot during nap time when God hit me with a startling realization. "IS God calling me to be a pastor?" My mind began putting all the pieces of my life and education together. My soul began awakening with a sense of purpose I had not felt before. "Maybe I AM being called to be a pastor." I never in a million years expected God to throw a ton of rocks at me.

I think Emanuel Church understands how God sometimes works in most unexpected ways. Through the tough work you all did with Rev. Mitchell, and with other pastors... this church has learned how to faithfully wrestle with God. Our church wrestled into existence a "love each other through our differences" attitude following schisms in the past. This congregation has wrestled into existence Park's Edge; a 5 day a week, full day, 5-star rated, nationally accredited Preschool. Our ancestors wrestled into policy the ability for women to vote in church decisions a quarter century before our nation allowed women a vote in elections. Our congregation wrestled into existence an extensive building project to make the church and our primary bathrooms handicap accessible and install an elevator. And just over 5 years ago we wrestled into naming our congregation Open and Affirming. We sometimes forget that each of these decisions, along with many others, are born through faithful struggle with God. Emanuel has not been a congregation afraid to have loving, critical discussions leading to actions which welcome, include, affirm, and strengthen our discipleship.

In fact we are engaged in a couple wrestling matches now. One example is the Executive Council's discussion about how to might deepen our welcome toward people who don't always feel at home in the physical gender in which they were born?

There will be other wrestling matches too. A team is looking into the possibility of some prayerful, spiritual based education on racial privilege during the next year. And there will surely be others, through which we will all need to cling to God and ask for God's guidance and blessing on the journey.

One of the most eye-opening lessons of my seminary education was; wrestling, struggling is inherent to Christian faith and discipleship. Wrestling with God is how we grow as disciples. When we look in the bible, every person who demonstrates deep faith also tells about times they wrestled with God.

But this IS different from the programs on TV, even different from my colleague roommates who were on our wrestling team. This isn't wrestling for the sake of winning and losing. This is wrestling for the sake of growing in faith. Wrestling for the sake of growing closer to God. Faithful wrestling like this takes place in the context of Covenant; a commitment to live with each other and with God through thick and thin, joy and sorrow, fear and courage, change and stability, life and death. Covenant assures us God who asks us to go off into the unknown like Abraham; or put our life on the line, like Esther; or face up to our sins, like Jacob; or lead a people to freedom, like Moses; or generously fund Christ's ministry like Lydia; or give birth to God's son like Mary; this God is reliable.

Hand in hand with God and each other we can go to the unknown, unsettling, unnerving places; we can go to tumultuous, troubled, tyrannized people... Knowing God is with us, and with all the people we are called to be with, in a most powerful way. In Covenant we trust God will provide all we need.

Mr. Iron Grip in our story today... Jacob sets the example by grasping onto God long enough to become absolutely convinced that no matter what or who Jacob had been in the past, or what he would face in the future, he could be absolutely sure God is faithful, steadfast, and reliable. This too, is the assurance for all people of faith, today and tomorrow.

Amen