

“Holding on to God”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (Genesis 32:26).

In today’s reading from Genesis, Jacob was about to meet his brother Esau. As you may remember from your Sunday School days, Jacob and his brother had quite a past. You see, Jacob had deceived Esau and their father Isaac, and cheated his brother out of his birthright; then fearing for his life, Jacob fled from his home. Now, years have passed, and Jacob is a wealthy man with a large family. He is finally facing up to the sins of his youth and, as today’s text opens, he is poised to meet the brother he had so blatantly betrayed. His confrontation with Esau is just hours away, he is all alone, and, while he anxiously waits for the meeting with his brother, Jacob suddenly finds himself in the fight of his life.

The text tells us that, “a man wrestled with him” throughout the night; but, as the story unfolds, and as other portions of Scripture tell us (Genesis 32:30; 48:16; Hosea 12:3-4), Jacob’s wrestling match was not simply with some nameless stranger...it was with God Himself. As day begins to break, this man who is God, commanded Jacob to release Him, and yet Jacob holds on, clinging to his opponent; demanding a blessing before he will loosen his grip. This improbable conflict is finally resolved when the Lord renews His blessing to Jacob, giving him the new name “Israel,” because, the Lord says, Jacob had, “struggled with God and with men” and had overcome.

All kinds of questions swirl around this story. Does Jacob really physically wrestle against God? That’s what it says. Does Jacob actually prevail in this mystical wrestling match? That’s what it says. Does Jacob truly see God face to face? That’s what it says. Martin Luther once wrote that, “This text is one of the most obscure in the Old Testament.” And with all of the questions raised in this reading, it’s easy to see why Luther would make such a statement.

There is so much wrapped up in this story that it’s tempting to simplify it into nothing more than a motivational tale; a fable telling us that if we would only strengthen our resolve and tighten our grip on God, then He will be forced to bless us. But if that’s what we take away from this reading, then I think it actually does more harm than good. In fact, I would say that to truly understand the meaning of this text for our lives we need to recognize that honestly confronting and holding on to God or, for that matter, anyone else, is the last thing we are inclined to do.

For the most part, we live lives of spiritual and emotional isolation, and we are very good at keeping others at arm’s length. The culture around us says “live and let live” and we gladly oblige. We have been raised with the notion that we should mind our own business, and while it’s certainly important not to try and control the lives of others, we take this idea too far, we wash our hands of responsibility for our brother or sister, and we so easily turn our backs on each other. And this laissez-faire approach to life means, we don’t confront issues that separate us. We refuse to bear each other’s burdens. We are unwilling to meet face to face and lock arms until our conflicts have been resolved. We reject the need to apologize and we fail to forgive. We work overtime at protecting ourselves, and, whether because of pride or fear, we are reluctant to wrestle each other, and our conflicts remain unresolved. We simply do not confront issues that separate us and the results of our reluctance to wrestle are broken relationships.

Not only do we avoid the issues we have with others, but we also avoid the issues we have with God. We are all-too-often unwilling to enter the struggle. We don’t take God seriously; we omit God from the vast majority of our lives; and even though we may come to church each week and say our prayers each night, in one way or another our sinful, selfish nature is unwilling to submit to God’s Word, especially when it

calls us to repentance. The result of *this* unwillingness to wrestle is a separation from God, and the distance we have created in our relationship with God is very serious because it has eternal implications, and it is also a problem we are powerless to repair! And this makes today's reading even more critical.

You see, one of the most important aspects of the wrestling match in today's text is the way in which it begins. Jacob's wrestling match with God doesn't happen because Jacob musters up the courage to confront God with his concerns. This midnight clash doesn't happen because Jacob went out looking for a fight. Our text tells us that, "Jacob was alone, and a *man* wrestled with *him*" (Genesis 32:24). God initiates the encounter. God creates the conflict. It is God who grabs a hold of Jacob and begins this divine wrestling match.

The purpose of God's struggle with Jacob is clear. In this life-changing story, God initiates this intimate conflict for one reason: God wrestles with Jacob so that He can bless him...and that is exactly what God does for us. God comes to us in our complacency, God comes to us in our stubbornness, God comes to us in our pride, and through the power of His Word, He shakes us up and creates a conflict so that, as a result of the struggle, He can bless us.

We often view God's work in our lives as something that is meek or as something that restores us gently and these things certainly do happen, but these things happen only through an intensely personal conflict, and it is a conflict that is centered on the Cross of Jesus Christ. You see, on the Cross, Jesus entered the struggle for us. Without our permission and void of our approval, He grabbed a hold on our pride. He took on our fear. He embraced our desire for isolation. He bore our sin. And through the terrible struggle of the Cross, Jesus Christ overcame for us. He overcame our sin, He overcame our fear, and – for us – Christ Jesus overcame death.

On the Cross, the Man who is God entered into the ultimate struggle so that for us there can be peace; so that for us there can be a blessing; so that for us there can be forgiveness; and so that we can have life. Peter writes that "Christ died for sins once for all...to bring you to God" (I Peter 3:18). And because of what Jesus did for us on the Cross, we can hold on to God's promises with all that we are, knowing that, in Christ, we have been blessed.

Jesus Christ has overcome! In Christ, you are forgiven and you have an eternal future, and through our new identity in Christ, He has also given you the power to live for others in a whole new way. In Christ, the people we have avoided are now people we can deal with face to face. The Hebrew word used for "wrestle" in today's reading can also be translated to mean "to struggle with" or "to get dirty." And that is what Christ means to us! Because Christ died for you and for me and for all the people with whom we've had conflicts, we can get into the dirt of the sin that has separated us from each other, and we can deal with each other in honesty and we can forgive!

In our reading the Man who is God wrestles with Jacob, He blesses him, and the next day, his relationship with his brother Esau is restored. Dear brothers and sisters, Jacob's story is a great encouragement that because of Christ, you can remain in the struggle and you can hold on. You can talk to your spouse about things that have come between you; in love you can confront issues with friends or co-workers; and in faith you can even wrestle with the Lord. When our relationships in this life become strained, when physical health fails, when emotional exhaustion and spiritual despair seem to overpower us, we can lock arms and hold on because the conflict has already been resolved. Our true identity is in Christ and, in Christ, we have been blessed with the power to persist and promise that in Him, we will prevail. Go in peace and hold on to this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold