Book 37

Sunday August 1, 1999

WRESTLING WITH GOD Genesis 32:22-31

The sport of wrestling has been in the news a lot lately. Wrestling matches as seen on television are increasingly popular. Jesse Ventura, the wrestler who is now the governor of Minnesota, calls pro wrestling, "ballet with violence." In a recent survey of the top TV programs, eight of the top 15 programs on cable television were wrestling matches.

Wrestling is also a metaphor used to describe dealing with problems. I hear people talk about "wrestling with temptation," or "wrestling with the devil," or "wrestling with a difficult decision." However I don't hear a lot of talk about

"wrestling with God." Yet according to the Bible story, that's what Jacob did. Here's how the Bible describes it. "Jacob was left alone; and there was one who wrestled with him until daybreak."

Here's the background of the story.

Jacob's father was Isaac and his mother Rebecca. He had a twin brother named Esau. But Jacob and Esau were about as different as brothers can be. They were different in appearance and in personality. The Bible describes Esau, the firstborn twin as being a "hairy man," a man's man. He liked the outdoors and he was a skillful hunter. He was the "macho man" and he was his father's

favorite. Jacob, on the other hand, is described as being a "smooth man." He was more feminine and he was his mother's favorite. He preferred to stay indoors and learned how to do what was then considered "women's work." The Bible describes him as being a quiet man.

Although twins, technically Esau was the oldest, having been born first and thus he would be the official head of the family upon Isaac's death. However, Jacob, following his mother's advice, took advantage of his brother's weakness and his father's failing eyesight and obtained his brother's birthright and his father's blessing. That's another story for a different sermon.

The deception practiced by Jacob with his mother's help only made wider the chasm between the two brothers. The story in Genesis states: "Now Esau hated Jacob...and he said to himself...as soon as it is possible I will kill my brother." Rebecca, the mother of the twins discovered what Esau was planning to do and she quickly arranged for Jacob to visit her relative Laban who lived far away and she promised that as soon as Esau's anger subsided, she would send word so that he could return home.

While living and working for his relative, Laban, Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. He loved her so much that he promised to work for Laban for seven years

if he could have Rachel as his wife. When the seven years were complete and it was time for the wedding, at the last minute Laban substituted his older daughter Leah as the bride and it wasn't until the ceremony was over that Jacob realized he had married the wrong woman.

Being a persistent individual, Jacob agreed to work another seven years if he could also have Rachel as his wife. One of the most beautiful sentences in this story of Jacob and Rachel is made by the storyteller in Genesis: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

The story of Jacob wrestling with God takes place as he is returning home. He is now rich beyond the vain imaginings of his youthful dreams, but still unreconciled to Esau through whose land he now must travel. He hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Fearing the worst and to placate his brother, Jacob sends servants ahead with gifts of prize livestock, goats, ewes and rams, camels, cows, bulls, and donkeys. Nonetheless Jacob fears for his life and for the lives of the members of his family.

It is in the midst of all this turmoil that Jacob is described as having wrestled with God. The story of that night by the river as he is preparing to meet his brother is filled with symbolism and

metaphors. Biblical scholars tell us that it is a weaving together of many ancient themes.

Here are some of them. The struggle takes place in the evening near the river as day turns into night, as light turns into darkness. There was an ancient belief that spirits and deities hovered near rivers and often manifested themselves at night. For ancient people, nightfall marked a boundary time when the brighter reality of the sunlight and the clear features of day gave way to darkness, dreams and visitations from the spirit world.

Many of us today do most of our worrying at night when we can't sleep or when we wake up before dawn. Then our mind runs rampant in

the dark and our deep fears come to the surface. We wrestle with problems and decisions and memories that seem to fade away during the light of day.

Surely you've had that experience. You can't sleep, or you wake from sleep. You turn and toss. You are fighting with yourself or the shadow of yourself or a figure you can't identify or all of these blended together.

Sometimes it's the struggle of the burdened mind, contending with memories you wish you had never gathered and fears so deep you have never dared to name them. What will tomorrow bring?

Like Jacob you could be wrestling with God although at the time you are not aware of it. Like Jacob you might be wrestling for the blessing of forgiveness, the blessing of grace, or the blessing of peace, or some other blessing that will sustain you when the sun is up and you must face the demands of a daytime world.

This wrestling with God can take many forms. Jacob seeks reconciliation not only with Esau but with himself. Esau may well have become Jacob's own shadow, that part of him that connives so ruthlessly, that part of him that he fears to face as much as he fears to face Esau himself.

Each one of us wrestles with God all the time. Every time you struggle to find your true purpose in life you are in a deep sense wrestling with God. Every time you face any kind of crucial decision in your life, you are wrestling with God.

Isn't it true that some of our greatest conflicts and struggles are internal. Our greatest enemies can be within. Our deepest wounds can be self-inflicted. So what is wrestling with God if not coming to grips with ourselves-- with strength from God. Wrestling with God is facing what we prefer to flee, admitting what we'd rather deny, letting the long separated alienated parts of ourselves have it out with each other.

After all, we are each one created in the image of God which means among other things that the Spirit of God always is a part of us, even when we are unaware of it. So many of our internal struggles are in the deepest sense wrestling with God. Will our selfish will or God's will be what guides our life?

Not only do we sometimes wrestle with God, but God is always trying to communicate with us. God gives us messages through other people, through our friends and even through our enemies and through our struggles within ourselves. Every human being has conversations with God of one sort or another. The scientist who searches for the truth is in communication with God. The problem is we

are not always aware of it.

That night on the banks of the river, Jacob decides to deny his demons no longer, to wrestle with them as long as it takes to bring them to light; to wrestle with them until they yield him a blessing.

Heretofore he had tried to solve his problems by running away from them. It's a strategy common to all of us especially in our younger years. Jacob was now learning that running was a solution that does not truly solve anything. It only puts off what must be faced later. He was now ready to make some changes in his life. He accepted the fact at last that the only way out is the way through, that

the good news comes from facing the bad news, not running from it. It was a kind of mid-life crisis for Jacob. Many people wrestle with God at that point. He had made his stake in life, but there was still something missing.

Some of you may remember the ancient myths about dragons that turn into princesses, demons that turn into angels, an assailant in the night proves to be none other than God. After all because we are created in the image of God, God wants us to become whole and holy, to be reconciled to ourselves so that we can be reconciled to others. That is the correct order for we sin out of our hurts. We wound because we first have been wounded. We try to grab others' blessings only because we have never

reached for and accepted the one blessing that each one of us needs and can have only for the asking, the blessing of God.

Although there is always mystery in these nighttime struggles, Jacob had now matured. He was no longer an escapist. A new quality emerged in him which also needs to emerge in each one of us. He said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." In other words, "I will not let go of this experience, of this soul-searching, of this inner questioning, of this wrestling with God, until I have learned from this experience what there is to be learned.

Sometimes we do let go of difficult struggles too soon before we have learned from them

what needs to be learned and so we miss their blessing. Some incidents are so earth-shaking, so painful, that we try to get away from them too fast and then we allow the experience to be wasted.

This quality of hanging on has it's practical consequences as well. Jacob used his strength and determination to get the job done just as millions of us do every day. In 1990, Herb Stein, drawing from 50 years experience making and analyzing economic policy, told some visiting and probably perplexed Russians that the basic reason for our prosperity is that 120 million Americans get up in the morning and go to work to do the best they can for themselves and for their families, and previous

millions did the same thing for two centuries.

We need to be every bit as persistent in our pursuit of our spiritual blessings as we are in our pursuit of our material benefits. We need to hang on to our struggles until we learn all that can be learned from them.

There's another wonderful metaphor in this story of Jacob wrestling with God. As a result of the struggle, Jacob's hip is out of joint and so he now limps as he walks. What is the inner meaning of his limping? It is a reminder that he can never run away from himself or from God again. His limp is an indication that he can trust in God's strength in addition to his own strength, for as the Apostle Paul later said,

"God's strength is made perfect in weakness." A wise person said, "To be sure, faith in God is a crutch, but who says you don't limp?"

After this wrestling with God a new humility begins to appear in Jacob. He is now able to confess his wrong to Esau, ask forgiveness and start anew.

No one person ever lives a full life without some brokeness. It can be physical or mental or both. It's what we learn from our struggles that counts.

Jacob is now free to return home. At peace with himself, he is ready to make peace with his brother, as he does. Having wrestled with God

he is ready for the promised land, that serenity that lies not on the near but on the far side of conflict, the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity.

And having wrestled with God he is ready for a new name that will be carried by descendants as numerous as the sands of the sea.

Here's one more truth for each one of us in our own lives from this story. In that nighttime wrestling of Jacob with God, who lost and who won? The good news about wrestling with God is that no one loses. Everyone wins. Amen.