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Year A Proper 13  
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Genesis 32:22-31  
Psalm 17:1-7,16  
Romans 9:1-5  
Matthew 14:13-21

May I speak in the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

My dad is semi-famous among a certain subset of Idahoans. As a teenager and a younger man, he was compact, strong, quick and most of all... he was deadly patient. All those things mix together to make a person a great wrestler. And my dad... he was one of the greats. He was such a good wrestler that the newspapers gave him a nickname: The Buhl Flash. People tell me he would wait for his opponent to make a small mistake and then like a flash of lightening would have them pinned before they know what was happening. He was number 2 in the state three years in a row, losing each time to a larger wrestler who cut wait to drop into his category. He may have been intelligent and fast,

but sometimes mass matters more... Just like in today's Old Testament lesson...

Dad never bragged about it; he never was stuck in memories of yesteryear glory-days. But when I was introduced to people growing up, I would occasionally hear something like, "Hey! You're the Buhl Flash's Kid!" ... such was the impression he had made. I tried to live up to his wrestling legend for a little bit... but physiologically I am my Mom's son...I was long limbed and all angles... Lots of purchase for an opponent to grapple and leverage and I was just never strong enough to match them. I would just get twisted into a pretzel by opponent after opponent.

One day my dad just told me, "You know I love you right? You don't need to do this to prove anything to me." And after that, I stopped wrestling... and focused on baseball where my long arms gave me advantage. I would never be a great wrestler like the Buhl Flash... I

didn't have the gifts for it. But I became a decent switch-hitting middle infielder... Still, I learned a lesson from my dad that day about what is important in being a good man: loving others for who they are... Wrestling careers end but wrestling with becoming something better... to become something more... never does.

There's always something with which to wrestle. And you may not come in first in state... but if you do it well, with style and grace, and even take the losses with respect for your opponent, you will leave a legacy that is more important than a momentary victory. You will make a name for yourself that others will respect long after the glory days have turned to relaxing on your front porch after a long career... Like my dad. And like Israel...

This is my favorite story about the patriarch Jacob. I alluded to it a few weeks ago in my sermon when I ran through a recap of Jacob's development from wicked trickster into the legendary man God

renamed Israel, meaning “Striving with God” in today’s Old Testament reading.

The reason it’s my favorite story is in this idea of wrestling with God.

What Chutzpah! In our post-enlightenment and evangelically influenced American Christianity the idea of wrestling with God is foreign, absurd, and many would say sinful.

Biblical literalism has damaged our perception of what it is to be faithful. Its influence even on us as mainline protestants has led us to feel guilt when we doubt... to worry if we’re sinful when we question... But here, in the very beginning of scripture is this model of a man who *literally* wrestled with God... Jacob had the gall to try and pin God down... Can you imagine?

Today... I invite you to start imagining... Doubt is not the opposite of faith, fear is. Doubt is the method through which we work our wrestling

with God... fainting, pressing in, clinging to God in desperation... hoping to finally understand God and our place in his unfolding universe. To contemplate our utter dependency on him for the fact that we are creatures amidst all the rest that is. To assure that we are not passing away with all that. To assure us that we matter, that we are seen and known... and loved.

Fear on the other hand keeps us from pressing into relationship... with God and with one another... Fear keeps us from asking the hard questions that lure us into a deeper love with God. Fear causes us to close in on ourselves, afraid of the answers we NEED to hear but are worried won't conform to our own self-will.

Fear keeps us from true relationship. With God, with one another. This is why the first thing God or an Angel says when they greet a human being in the Scripture is "DO NOT BE AFRAID". Engage with me. Know me... and through that struggle come to know yourself and your value

to God... God who so loved the world that he gave his only son to prove it... Doubt is a healthy first step to any learning process. But fear prevents and destroys relationships.

Jacob's wrestling with God redeems him. When the match began, he was a trickster named Yaacob, the name of his selfish *selfness*. It is replaced with the name that all of his descendants, the Children of Israel, still bear.

ISRAEL: which means to Struggle, or wrestle, or strive, with God. It can also mean all those things in reverse: God Strives. God Strives with us... pulling us in ever closer. God is not afraid to wrestle with you in your questions as you grow in faith. Jacob, the name associated with deceit, is replaced with a name bestowed as a blessing for perseverance in great struggle: Israel. His past gives way to future promise next to a ford in a tributary of the Jordan river. The early church fathers proclaimed this to be a vision of baptismal rebirth and naming... being

known by God... Truly known... and through that knowing yourself anew... renamed. reborn in HOPE... after struggle.

Striving with God is not without risk. Wrestling with God for a blessing leaves its mark on us. For Jacob, now Israel, that was a real injury he carried for the rest of his life... a physical reminder to Israel and his descendants of the cost of the struggle for faith and God's blessings. In Jacob's case his sign would be counted as a weakness by his world. And that is still very much the case in our society... a life of faith is counted as weakness by some. Wrestle anyway.

Notice that Jacob persevered to a victory in the struggle despite the injury. Even injured he continued to grapple through the night until he won God's blessing. In their midrash on this passage the rabbis hone in on that: Persevering through the injury is an additional trial that demonstrates Jacob's desire to prevail through the struggle for his blessing... This time it is a blessing he earns by his own actions... Unlike

the blessing he stole from his brother Esau when he impersonated him and tricked their father Isaac.

Struggle is worth it and it matters. But it is important to keep the goal in mind when the wounds from the struggle threaten your ability to continue. Hope is what pulls you through in those times. Ask any recovering addict when they knew they could win the struggle and they will almost always tell you it was when another who had been there before demonstrated real hope in them.

The world is in a hard place right now and many are down and out... wondering if there is value in the struggle. It is the Church's role to be like our own Good Shepherd, Jesus, taught us to be. To find the lost sheep, bind them up, and feed them... bring them into this flock, his kingdom. To give them hope.

As a parish we are currently demonstrating hope in our capital campaign. The reason I believe in it... that I have hope in it... is that it is

precisely what Newport and our economy need right now. A place where Trinity interacts with Newport Community Schools in the process of helping others retool themselves for new careers in better paying jobs as CNAs, Phlebotomists, Electricians, Pipe-fitters... all the careers that will build them up to take care of us or allow them to build the new world that will surely come after this long night of wrestling with a pandemic gives way into a renamed tomorrow.

I HOPE IN THAT! This parish hopes in that. And one day those who come to our parish for that remaking, like the Buhl Flash, will look back on a life well lived. And they will say it all started here... on our campus... in a church that dared to partner in hope for something new... A place that showed them hope in themselves. Hope Matters. Wrestling with our Faith Matters. The world is desperate for THE great story that we are called to proclaim. Like Jacob we must struggle and become something new... giving up our previous life in the struggle to know God and to know ourselves in him anew.

Tricks and deception, triangulation and sneakiness... they did not win the day for Jacob in the end. He had to give them up to win the blessing. Acknowledge your doubt and persevere in the struggle to win through it. And let us do that together.

For we have been grafted into the family of Israel through the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ... When the disciples doubted, Jesus blessed and broke bread to feed the thousands he had *taught* that very day. He will relieve our doubt. In *his* name we now strive. So... feel no shame for doubt, Jesus redeems it. Instead let it inform your wrestling. Do Not Be Afraid. Trust in Jesus. Wrestle with the big questions. Feed the World. Build the Kingdom.

Amen.