



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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No Holds Barred

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Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob Wrestles With God

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"
"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[a] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."
But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

I spent a good portion of my teenage years, as well as the entirety of my adult life working with young people and their families. And there's something unique about working with young people that I think is often lost in the ministry and education that we do with adults.

Whether it's ministry, or education, or mental health, whatever the venue, we understand that an important part of a young person's growth is challenge: obstacles that they have to work to overcome to build resilience, perspective, and a sense of self and community.

Working for several years at a summer camp, one of the primary ways that we practice this type of work is through something called a trust fall. If you don't know what a trust fall is, it's an exercise in which one person must trust another; the first person falls backward into their partner's arms. The idea is that you can't see that the person is behind you to catch you, so you must *trust* their presence. Trust that they will actually catch you. At the pinnacle of this activity, one person might stand on a platform that is 4 or 5 feet above the ground and fall backward into the arms of a group of people. It's scary, and it's unnatural, and you have to convince yourself that this is indeed safe – that there are people there to catch you. You have to trust in the relationship.

This exact idea of trust has shifted my understanding of faith. I think oftentimes people think that faith simply means “belief.” But I think that faith is more like trust. If I were to do a trust fall with my young daughters, I might fully *believe* that they are behind me, but I would have no *trust* that they could catch me. Faith in Jesus is trusting that he can catch you, not simply believing that he is there.

This, I think, is why faith is rightly described as a relationship with God. It’s not simply a belief that He is there, it’s a trust and a relationship that his existence and his connection with you is impactful and important. A trust that you can fall into His arms.

This brings me to something that I think we often get wrong about relationships: Being in relationship with someone does not mean unequivocal peace, contentedness, and agreement. Perhaps we understand that on a person-to-person basis, but on an organizational basis, I think it’s getting harder to find venues for healthy disagreement.

We pull our children out of schools that don’t teach in the ways that we would choose, we switch our membership from churches that don’t preach messages that we want to hear, we slam politicians and leaders for the mistakes that they’ve made, we become estranged from family that chooses to live differently than we do.

I’ve spoken about all of this in the past, but here’s where I want to go today: We take these habits, and we pull them

into our faith. Our relationship with God. I think that we've lost some of our ability to wrestle with the difficult nuance of our relationship with God. Remember, relationship does not mean that we agree unequivocally. Relationship means we trust – even when it's hard, even when it feels unnatural, even when it's scary.

We've lost this ability to wrestle with nuance in other areas of our lives, and I believe that we've lost it in our faith communities as well. So, I'm here today with a simple message: It is okay to wrestle with God. It is okay to disagree with God. It is okay to question God. We see it time and again in scripture. Abraham negotiates with God, Moses challenges God's vision, Jonah tries to outrun God's demands, Peter argues with Jesus, Jesus pleads with God for a new plan.

Why is that we feel that we must fall in line or we'll be struck down by some divine lightning?

Relationships don't exist in a vacuum – we all bring our past as well as our present with us when we approach Jesus. We bring all that we are. Our context comes with us wherever we go. It's never *just* sunshine and daisies.

This is where we find Jacob, alone on the banks of Jabbok river in our scripture from Genesis 32. Jacob is wallowing in the impending consequences of the man that he's been for the past few decades. His context has caught up with him. Let's be clear about one thing here. Jacob, like so many of

the people we read about in scripture, is far from what you might call a stand-up citizen. He cheated his brother out his birthright, he's lied about his identity, he swindled family members out of their own wealth, he's challenged cultural norms, he's built his riches and legacy on the backs those around him. And he ran away from the consequences every single time.

But he can run no longer. He can't flee from the tension anymore. He's headed home to the place where everyone knows his faults. Where everyone knows who he really is. And he's afraid for his life. He's so afraid, in fact, that he sends out gifts of tremendous value ahead of him to appease the armies that he fears are going to kill him and his family. So here he is, all alone. He's burned just about every bridge that he ever crossed. He's run from tension time after time. He's jumped ship on every relationship that wasn't for his own profit. And *that* is the place that he meets with God. Jacob's relationship with God is one of the very few things that has been with him throughout his story. Good or bad. Up or down. Righteous or lawless. Jacob has known God.

Here on the banks of the river, they wrestle. They struggle against one another. In the midst of the fear. In the midst of the running. In the midst of the pain, the doubt, the uncertainty. They wrestle. The fight goes on for the entirety of the night. It's as if the decades of pain that Jacob has endured are being poured out in this one night. He fights against God all night long.

Think about that. God is NOT overpowered. God could end this fight in the blink of an eye, but he stays in the fight with Jacob. Jacob is a man wounded by his own history. By his own choices. And now he's flailing. He went to bed that night ready to literally fight for his life, and now he's fighting. Jacob doesn't run from God, and God doesn't run from Jacob. That is the power of a true relationship with God.

Do you see it? The mark of any strong relationship is the ability to endure. Strong relationships stand, even in the midst of struggle. So why do we think that we can't wrestle with God? Are we that uncertain of our relationship? Are we that unsure of His love for us? God comes to us in the midst of whatever context we bring. Our past, our present, the mistakes we run from, the times that we've failed and the times that we're afraid for what tomorrow might bring. God stays in the fight with us. And that means that we can stay in the fight with God.

It comes down to a matter of trust. You can trust that God can and will meet you wherever you are, with whatever baggage you carry with you. You can fall backward, my friends. It's safe to trust. It's safe to wrestle. It's safe to fall. 1 John 4 tells us that "perfect love drives out fear." The more love we find in Christ, the less afraid we are to fall. The less afraid we are to wrestle. And the less afraid we are to be changed by the relationship. Remember, Jacob walks away from this encounter with two things: a limp, and a new name. Our relationship with God changes us. Relationship opens us to change, and love enables the growth.

So, friends: bring your doubts, bring your burdens, bring your past and bring your present. Your successes and failures. Your pride and your shame. Your love and your hate. Your close ties and your burned bridges. Bring it all with you. If you are exhausted from the life that is behind you, then fall into his arms. And if you need to wrestle, then fight like your life depends on it. But stay in the fight. Amen.



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