

Wrestle Long Enough

Genesis 32:22-32

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September 27, 2015

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

The Bible is not often associated with sports. We know of course that tennis is there, for Joseph served in Pharaoh's court. And rodeo is there, for Jesus rode a colt that no one else had ever ridden. But the Bible sport that's the focus of Genesis 32 is wrestling. Jacob wrestles with an angel all night. "All night" means simply "long enough."

Jacob is on his way home after being away maybe three decades. He has two wives, 12 children, and more livestock than anyone in the country. But as he nears the home village, he is flooded with dark memories of his adolescence. In his teen years, he connived to cheat his older brother Esau out of his birthright, and later conspired to cheat the same older brother out of the blessing that rightly belonged to him. As he nears the village, Jacob recalls how strong Esau is, what a brute he is. Jacob, though successful in material ways, now finds himself full of anxiety because Esau may be waiting to take revenge after all these years. Jacob's connivery has come back to haunt him.

He can't sleep, worrying about the confrontation with Esau. As he paces back and forth at sundown, an angel appears. And the angel wrestles mightily with Jacob. Double leg take-downs, hammer locks, leg locks, half nelsons; all the wrestling techniques are used to gain an upper hand. Finally, the angel knocks Jacob's hip out of joint! Jacob is humbled by the angel. The angel says something like, "now you have the blessing you need to face your brother." A broken hip is NOT the blessing Jacob had in mind.

But in the morning, he sees that his new limp is a sign of the humility he needs to face his past. He doesn't need a Superman cape or a Bat mobile or a Spiderman web. He needs a contrite heart. He needs an openness to being forgiven. With this awkward blessing, he continues on to his home village to confront his past. This blessing of a contrite heart will set him free.

Many of you know that this is among my favorite of all the Bible stories. The thought of wrestling with an angel all night long, or as long as it takes, in order to gain a blessing for facing what must be faced, feels like the kind of varsity sport that all people of faith engage in from time to time.

What I know is that the angels appear when the time is right for wrestling. The time is right when the question arises: 'what will I do with the rest of my life?' or 'what will my college major be, now that I've changed it three times already?' or 'now that I have this diagnosis, what are my new priorities?' or 'alcohol seems to have gotten the upper hand in my life, how can I find sobriety?' or 'I have made my first million, why is my life in the Pit?' These are times for wrestling all night with the angels, wrestling as long as it takes for the blessing to appear. And, as Jacob discovered, the blessing from the angel is not always the one we had imagined for ourselves.

And what is most interesting to me is that it is the angel who takes the initiative! It wasn't Jacob who summoned the angel to come and duke it out. The angel makes the first move. For me, this is a clear sign of how deeply God cares about each of us, cares enough to deploy an angel to confront us on the wrestling mat.

I'd like to tell you about one of the angels in my life. His name was Cecile Edward Price. We called him George. George had come to America as an immigrant, seeking a better life for himself and his family.

He had landed a minimum wage job at the Pearl Brewery in San Antonio where I was attending college. He had a high school education and he had a passion for soccer. Through a convoluted series of twists and turns, he had become the Trinity University soccer coach. Though I was his starting center forward, he saw that I was clumsy in being a student, clumsy in being an adult, clumsy in making good decisions in my personal life. He proceeded to wrestle with me. And this wrestling match lasted four years. He insisted I take a course in modern dance to improve my coordination. He invited me to his home where his wife fed me on what they could afford: tomato sandwiches with mayonnaise.

When I showed up late to a practice, he sent me running around the field ten times. When I mouthed off to a referee, he benched me. Somehow, he saw what I needed, a large measure of humility, a contrite heart, and some wisdom for sorting out what is wise from what is foolish. George Price wrestled me to the ground; dislodged my hip, metaphorically speaking; and didn't let go until my name was called four years later at the graduation ceremony and Dr. Laurie handed me my degree.

I suppose angels sometimes appear in white gowns or with tiaras around their heads or with a sprinkling of pixie dust. But in my experience, they come off immigrant ships from Europe; they work in unlikely settings; they are human beings who care enough to wrestle with you long enough until the blessing comes.

I attended my 25th college reunion and George was there. I told him I had become a minister and I thanked him for being an angel in my life. He looked at me like he had no idea what I was talking about. That's the way it is with angels. They come; they do their sacred work; and then they move on to their next challenge, not looking back, not needing to be thanked, just glad to have wrestled for a time.

I share this story with you because sooner or later, we all need an angel to wrestle us down on the mat, to bless us with what we need to face what must be faced. It is because I believe God sends angels to wrestle with us that I remain in the greatest of hope.
Amen!