

Wrestling...

2 August 2020

Did you know that wrestling is one of the oldest forms of combat? It's been around about 15,000 years and was an original sport used in the ancient Olympic games in 708 BCE. It was also included in the first "modern" Olympic summer games in 1896. See what happens when I can't sleep? I go down a rabbit hole of facts.

Today's Hebrew Scripture story is fairly well known. Jacob wrestles with someone or something and they wrestle for a very long time. The average wrestling match lasts about seven minutes. The longest wrestling match was during the 1912 Olympics and lasted eleven hours and forty minutes. Can you imagine?

Have you ever watched Greco-Roman wrestling? I'm not referring to the entertainment style wrestling you can watch on television, I mean proper wrestling, the kind that is taught in schools. When two people wrestle they are very close to the other and very close to the ground. The goal is to pin their opponent to the ground using only their upper body strength.

So when we think of Jacob wrestling, we would think that the match would be over fairly quickly, right? Not with these two. There's a lot of stuff to unpack here.

Jacob has stolen Esau's birthright. If you remember a few weeks ago we heard the birth story of Isaac and Rebekah's twins. Esau was born only moments before Jacob. Esau was covered in a mantle of hair and was thus called Esau. Jacob was called thus because it means "heel, as well as to follow, to supplant and to over-reach". One day when Esau came in from the fields, starving, he begged Jacob for a bowl of stew. Jacob agreed only if Esau have him his birthright, as firstborn. Esau agreed because he was hungry and because his birthright didn't matter to him.

Later in the story, Isaac is aware that he is nearing death and he calls Esau to him to go and hunt game that he will prepare and feed his father who will then bestow the blessing of the firstborn son upon him. Rebekah hears this and after Esau has left she helps Jacob masquerade as Esau to receive Isaac's blessing. Which leaves Esau none too pleased. Jacob has cheated Esau out of his birthright as first-born. This means that the first-born son would receive a double-portion of his father's assets. Jacob was meant to receive 1/3 of the estate, and now, he will receive 2/3.

Now, God would have been aware of all this and all the drama that followed. If you're needing something to do this afternoon, I recommend reading the Book of Genesis. Seriously captivating reading! Jacob was not all bad. He worked fourteen years to marry his love. It was supposed to be seven years, but then he was duped on the wedding night by Laban, and told him he could marry Rebekah, but it would cost him seven more years. And Jacob did that. He worked as a slave for his father-in-law for fourteen years in order to marry the women he loved.

So now we are at the point in the story where Jacob is preparing to make amends with his brother Esau, has called a truce with his father-in-law Laban, and is preparing to sleep, after sending his wives and children to the other side of the river where he will join them in the morning. Except he ends up wrestling all night.

We don't know who the man is, where he came from or how he got there. It is only through Jacob asking for a blessing that we can sense this man is no ordinary man. The man doesn't tell Jacob his name, it is Jacob which deduces the man is God. Thus the place is called Penuel or Peniel. I spent close to an hour trying to decide why there are two spellings and none of the sources I went to agreed. Which leads me to decide it really doesn't matter for the benefit of telling this story.

Jacob wrestled God all night long. God won only because he clobbered Jacob in the hip socket, crippling him for life. Was that a fair way to fight?

God doesn't ever say anything about fair. Neither does Jesus.

What else could Jacob have been wrestling?

How about his conscience. He had done some pretty dirty deals. He was acting like, well, a heel. And he didn't seem to care what he had done to his brother, his father or his father-in-law. By most of society's measures, Jacob was not a good man, yet he was blessed by God. He survived seeing the face of God! It was well known that you shall not see the face of God and live. Not only did Jacob see God's face, he received a blessing and a new name...Israel. Israel means "striven with God".

What are the things you wrestle with? Not physically, but emotionally? Spiritually? Intellectually?

Another historic Biblical character who wrestled was Paul. And in his letter to Rome speaks of the truth in Christ. He describes himself as being in great sorrow and feeling unceasing anguish in his heart. Why? Because he wants to bring the Israelites to Christ. Remember, Paul was a zealot against Jesus and all things Christian. Then, on his way to Damascus he had a blinding epiphany where God spoke directly to him. Ordered him to change his ways, and gave him a new name. Sound familiar? Saul, who became Paul is still a zealot, he's simply a zealot for the opposite team.

And finally today we have Matthew's account of the feeding of the 5,000. Poor Jesus, he's trying to have a moment to himself. "He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns." (Matthew 14.13, NRSV) He just wants time to himself yet the crowd is large and suffering, so he goes ashore to the crowd and begins healing.

After several hours his disciples come to him and suggest he send the crowd away because it is time to eat and there isn't enough food. They have only five loaves and two fish. And rather than send them away, Jesus "looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full". (Matthew 14.19-20, NRSV)

Wow. Now, keep in mind, in those days, people would travel with a days worth of food. When they left home in the morning, they would put fish, bread, wine, whatever they had, into a bag that they would carry with them. There weren't rest areas as we understand them and there was certainly no restaurants where food could be purchased. So perhaps this event was, the first potluck meal?

Jesus raised the fish and bread, blessed it and broke it, then shared it with the person beside him. That person shared what they had with the person beside them. And so on and so forth until there was food leftover. The miracle was not that the fishes and loaves multiplied by magic, but by the generosity of those who had gathered.

I'm not trying to take anything away from the miracle of the feeding. What do you think would happen today if that were to happen? Remember the opening slide? Jesus with a fish in one hand and a loaf in the other. And the crowd comments "I can't eat that, I'm vegan". Another says "Has that fish been tested for mercury?" and still another says "Is that bread gluten-free?"

What our readings teach us today is that it is okay to wrestle with our faith. It is okay to have doubts. It is perfect acceptable to choose to share, even if you have to be asked to do so. We are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. We are called to give all we have to God, and to give thanks for all that we have received.

It does, however bug me that the Gospel reading for today ends "And those who ate it were about five thousand men, besides women and children." (Matthew 14.21, NRSV) but that is a sermon for another day.

Remember to be kind, be calm and be safe.
Remember to be generous, even when you don't have to.
Remember to choose love first. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Reverend Andrea L. Brennan
Pastor, Priest and Prophet
Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Fernie, BC

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 32.22-31
Romans 9.1-5
Matthew 14.13-21