

“Wrestling for a Blessing”

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31 ~ Romans 9:1-5 ~ Matthew 14:13-21

A few weeks before our marriage, John’s “soon to be best man” took us to see a professional wrestling match. I don’t know if it was George’s not so subtle warning to John about what he might have in store if he went through with the wedding, but it was a night I will always remember. It was a diverse audience, but mostly the working poor ... those who competed with one another every day for the crumbs of jobs that fell from the rich folks table. Often at each other’s throats, they were united that night by the pageantry unfolding before them.

Each match had the same basic plot ... the good guy ... clean-cut ... fancy costume ... handsomely coifed hair / the bad guy ... unshaven ... disheveled costume ... stringy hair. They even had great names to demonstrate this good guy/bad guy boundary ... “Dusty Rhodes” (good guy) ... “Dirty Dick Murdoch,” (bad guy) ... “Nature Boy Ric Flair” (good guy) ... “Killer Kowalski” (you guessed it ... bad guy). During each match the referee was continually distracted ... talking to the timekeepers or arguing with the bad guy’s manager ... while the bad guy pulled the good guy’s hair or beat him over the head with a chair. Occasionally the referee might actually catch the bad guy in the act and let him off with a lame warning, or worse, warn both of the wrestlers at the same time as if they were equally guilty ... the way you always do if you have kids. But soon the bad guy was cheating again, and the good guy was staggering around the ring in agony while the referee did nothing.

The crowd howled. They knew this narrative ... it was often the story of their lives ... work hard ... play by the rules ... while others cheat and get ahead of you. Meanwhile those in control do nothing or even hassle you. The first three matches, the bad guy won. Life can be like that. It just isn’t fair.

But in the fourth and main event of the night, an amazing thing happened. The good guy was losing, as usual. The bad guy ... the nastiest of the night ... had pinned the good guy after whacking him on the head with a billy club he had pulled out of his shorts while the referee was discarding a Dixie cup that the bad guy’s manager had thrown into the ring. Like the others before him, this hero was about to go down for the count. The crowd was humming like an electric generator, frustrated by the unfolding scene. But suddenly, the good guy flipped ... the bad guy flopped ... the good guy jumped on top ... the bad guy was pinned. One! Two! Three! The match was over! The good guy won!

It was as if some unseen hand had goosed every person in the room. They went wild! They leapt to their feet! They jumped on their chairs! They screamed! They laughed! They

hugged! And they went home satisfied ... thinking maybe there was some hope after all for the decent people to win out in the end. Now I'm sure that all the beer they had consumed spurred their jubilation. But it was still quite a show with a good moral ... if you play by the rules ... hang tough ... wrestle on and don't give up ... you might just win after all. And it's the story of Jacob in our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning

We can tell something about Jacob's nature from his name. In the Bible, names mean something, and that certainly is the case with the name Jacob. It means, "heel-grabber" or "supplanter." The name reflects a character trait that was there even while Jacob was struggling with his twin brother in the womb, grabbing his brother's heel in the vain effort to be the first-born son, a status that carried considerable benefits in ancient times. His pro wrestling name would have been "Jake the Snake."

Jacob was wrestling with a lot of things that night when he camped. He was wrestling with his guilt, his fear, his past, his future, his conscience, his faith. He was coming back to the very land that he had left years before after cheating his twin brother Esau out of both birthright and blessing. Jake's momma had saved his skin back then by sending him way up north to Haran to find a wife. As we say in the South, they had people there. Jake prospered in Haran ... but in his usual style ... by scheming and playing and cheating his father-in-law, Laban. Now with bridges burned both behind him and before him, the proverbial chickens were coming home to roost.

Momma wasn't with him now as Jake got word that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 "friends," and let me tell you ... they weren't planning a family picnic. The Bible says that when Jacob heard this news he totally freaked and tried to step sideways as usual. He divided his family and sent them off in different directions. He sent his flocks ahead in small bunches and gave each herder special instructions to present them to Esau as a gift. Finally, though, he faced the long night alone with himself ... not knowing whether his family had been saved or destroyed ... not knowing whether his gifts had been accepted or rejected ... and not knowing whether the morning would bring him death or life.

He began to pray to God for help as he faced his demons alone in that long night. And then, the Bible tells us, "some guy wrestled with Jacob until daybreak."

Who is this Stranger who attacks him alone in the middle of the night? We don't know. His adversary is variously described as a man, or as an angel, or as God. The Stranger does not let go. Jake is injured, but Jake does not let go. They wrestle on. In the morning, when the tired battlers in the night confronted one another and looked each other in the eye, it was Jacob, though wounded, who seemed to have prevailed, which is a bit of a surprise if, indeed, his adversary was God. What kind of God could it be who was bested by a mere mortal? A dear friend and clergy colleague put it this way ... "maybe it's the kind of God who became human

so that we might discover the divine that is within us? Maybe it's the kind of God who becomes weak so that we might be strong? Maybe it's the kind of God who seeks not our submission but our embrace, not our coerced obedience but our freedom to choose how we will live and whom we will serve? Maybe it's the kind of God who sent his son not to condemn us, but to save us?"

The Stranger says, "Let me go now, the day is breaking," but Jacob says, "I will not let go unless you bless me." The Stranger says, "Who are you?" Jacob confesses, "My name is 'Heel-grabber.'" And how appropriate a name it is, for all of his life Jacob has devoted his energy and wit to usurping what rightfully belongs to others. Jacob at heart is nothing more than a fraud, and deep down, you see, Jacob knows this. And so, when the stranger pins Jacob down and demands to know his name, he is demanding no less than that Jacob confess ... confess his ill-gotten gains and shoddy character ... confess his misused talents and wasted life. And to do this ... to come clean ... is for one such as Jacob ... nothing less than death ... for when the con man and phony is revealed for what he is ... what has he left?

Viewed this way, we can hardly refrain from rejoicing at this scene ... for at long last Jacob is about to receive his proper comeuppance ... to be put in his place once and for all and finally get what he deserves. We want to leap to our feet ... jump on our chairs ... scream and laugh and howl! *Except* ... *except* that in the face of Jacob's confession of his name, the Stranger ... far from doling out the punishment Jacob both certainly merits and probably expects ... the Stranger gives Jacob a new name.

He says, "You shall no longer be called 'Heel-grabber,' but 'Striver' shall be your name! And it was clearly one of those moments of transformation ... a turning point. "Jake the Snake" became "Israel the Striver"... a name second in significance only to God's in the Old Testament ... the name which means either "God wrestles" or "one who wrestles with God" or maybe both since it takes two to wrestle, of course.

And so, the scene concludes with Jacob limping away from this contest not defeated but victorious ... carrying a new name and character ... and living life as a new person. In the end the Stranger blesses Jacob. For not only will Jacob and Esau be reconciled in the chapters to come, but Jacob will also sire a nation from his twelve sons ... and they and their descendants proudly bear his name even to this day.

In Baptism we, too, are given a new name ... as God beholds us ... calls us God's own ... and names us Christ. And this is where things get powerful. Because truth be told, we are each called by so many names day in and day out ... some of them good and affirming ... many more not. It can be terribly difficult even to hear, let alone believe, that God chooses to call us

Christ. And yet there it is, in the eighth chapter of Romans ... Paul's promise that the Holy "Spirit and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are heirs as well, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16,17)

Who are you? Who are you really? What is your name? What is it that others call you? More importantly, what is it that you call yourself? What is that name you can scarcely speak for fear or shame ... scoundrel, cheat, or phony like Jacob ... unworthy, irresponsible, unfaithful ... discouraged or burnt-out ... coward or bully ... unloved or unloving ... disappointed or disappointing ... abused or abuser?

I think that *only* when we confess the names that we wear and bear... can we also hear God's unrelenting response ... "No! No! You are Christ! To me you are Christ! You are my beloved ... the one I chose ... the one to whom I am committed ... and to whom I promise to protect and care for all the days of your life. For you are my child. You are Christ!" I invite you to be reminded once again of your true name and your new identity ... so that you may go out into the world as a new person ... as God's own beloved child.

Let this church be the place that you can come to each week and bring all your other names with you ... confessing them honestly ... and then leaving them behind ... departing this assembly simply as Christians ... those who bear the name of Christ ... those armed with the love, commitment, and courage of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... the God of Israel ... the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, we pray that you will be the God of the Second Chance for us ... that you will meet us on the level of our understanding to the depth of our need ... and that we will renew and be renewed so we can be useful in your kingdom and fulfilled in our lives. Remind us once again of our true name and new identity ... so that we may go out into the world as new persons ... as your own beloved children. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.