

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, August 3, 2014
Lessons: Genesis 32:22-31, Romans 9:1-5, and Matthew 14:13-21

WRESTLING MATCH

From experience I can tell you that wrestling for an extended time is very tiring. It was gym class, and the instructor divided us into two teams to wrestle each other. One team would win when everyone on the other team had been pinned. The extra rule was that we must not stand up. So, we began from the second starting position: one on his hands and knees, the other kneeling over him. I started on the bottom. My opponent outweighed me but not drastically. For twenty or thirty minutes, I tried to switch on him as he tried to turn me over for a pin. Despite all our straining and trying what few moves we knew, neither of us could get the better of the other. At one point, by mutual consent, we took a rest before starting again. So, I can feel for Jacob in our story of his long-night's match with his unknown assailant. Wrestling to a draw is exhausting.

Finally, my opponent made a sound that told me something was happening, and when I looked up I started to laugh. There were five or six guys chugging toward us as fast as they could go on their knees. I was the last one on my team and was about to be under a pile. I didn't ask my opponent for a blessing; his teammates were bringing that for both of us.

Jacob eventually realizes he has been wrestling with God, which at first sounds very strange and surely unique to the man who would be given the name Israel as a father to God's people, but on second thought, we may realize it is neither strange nor unique to him. People of faith wrestle with God and sometimes come away from the match limping because something about them has been put out of joint. Anyone who thinks faith makes life easy and comfortable has not yet lived it very much. Faith is a matter of entrusting myself and my life to the unseen God whose viewpoint and agenda differ vastly from my own.

Faith in Jesus, the crucified Son God, the Servant Messiah, whom God raised from the dead to be our Servant Lord, gives us astounding hope for ourselves and for the entire creation God loves, but in giving us such great hope, faith also raises many questions and puts us into a deep struggle – a wrestling match if you will, with God, life, the world, and our own egos. Faith is trust: trust in the redemptive love of God for us but also for the rest of this world's people including those we fear or just don't like. By raising the disgraced and executed Jesus from the dead, God has not only vindicated him but has made him the first-born of the new creation that will be completed when all that hurts and destroys is removed

and God's compassion is established as the life force of a new heaven and a new earth. Just beginning to comprehend such an extreme promise takes some effort. It's a struggle to let ourselves hope for something so radically new and different, especially as it calls our certainties into question. Imagine a world in which empathy overcomes our suspicion of people different from us, in which all are treated with equal respect, in which compassion replaces blaming, in which healing becomes more important to all of us than revenge and enabling others to thrive more important than gaining our own advantage. To some that new world sounds beautiful, but to others who love the way this world operates to produce winners and losers, it sounds repulsive. Faith in the crucified and risen Christ requires us to start thinking and living in terms of that promised reality God wants for us.

If faith were merely proper beliefs, Christian living would be easy. Annoying to people around us, but easy. Faith, however, is something open, not closed. It does not seek to explain away people's griefs and sufferings so they seem to make sense; rather, faith seeks healing including that very special healing we know as forgiveness. Faith in Christ does not use principles to judge who is right and who is wrong, who deserves help and who does not, but resonates with God's compassion for the deserving and the undeserving. Neither does faith scorn people's questions and doubts but enters into their anguished questions respectfully and feels their doubts and the fears beneath them. The true opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty, or as I prefer to put it, certitude.

To help myself understand, I use the analogy of courage. Is courage the absence of fear? No, it is not. Unless I am afraid, I cannot be brave. I may be so competent to face the present danger that I have nothing to fear, or I may be just plain foolish, but unless I am afraid, I cannot be brave. Courage is that which wrestles with my fear and triumphs enough, sometimes barely enough, to enable me to go forward. But without having fears and facing them, I can neither have courage nor strengthen it.

The real test comes, however, when I need to overcome my own fears in order to strengthen someone else in his or hers. Jesus Christ calls us to put our trust in him so we can unite in him with others who have put their trust in him in the service of God's love for all this world's people and for the entire created order. The Spirit of God engages us together with others in the promise of a new creation – in wanting what God wants. The Spirit enables us to resonate with the compassion of God which Jesus has brought us and embodied for us in his broken body.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus is tired out and needs to be by himself for a while. So he heads for a deserted place, but when his boat comes ashore, there is already a crowd waiting for him. We read, “. . . and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” Compassion is not pity which reaches down to the less significant people and does something

kind for the “poor things.” Compassion means “suffering with.” It unites us with the people whose fear and pain are exposed to us so that we become vulnerable with them. Compassion is not a matter of declaring, “I know how you feel” or “I feel your pain,” but of opening ourselves to that other person’s pain, becoming vulnerable to it. In the flesh-and-blood Jesus, the vulnerability of God’s love for us is embodied and taken to its conclusion on the cross.

Faith in him learns to listen and wait openly instead of rushing to judgment. It learns to recognize people as persons instead of categorizing and labeling them. Jesus gets angry at people’s hardheartedness and cruelty, but he never turns away from anyone in disgust. “The thief,” he says, come only to steal and kill and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Christ’s calling to join with others in representing to people his compassion and redemptive love not only requires us to let ourselves become vulnerable, but also can make us feel downright inadequate. The magnitude of God’s promise of a new creation with a new spirit of life and love can leave us shaking our heads. What can you and I do for that? The depth of fear and prejudice in outwardly good people and the ferocity of hate in our world are overwhelming. What can we bring to match such powerful evil or treat the suffering it produces? How can we even help? “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” Jesus replies, “Bring them here to me.” That’s all I ever have and all the churches ever have. How many times in forty years of pastoral ministry was I forced to realize I could do nothing but listen, pray, and wait with someone whose grief was unavoidable and whose hurt I could not cure? But hear the irony. Because I was utterly inadequate but at least knew I had no answers that would solve the problem, I could only entrust the situation to God – “only”!

A Presbyterian elder I met a few years ago told me that as a girl in confirmation class she had irritated her pastor with her many questions. She always had questions about how and why and why not, until finally the minister, red almost to purple in the face, yelled at her to stop asking questions and just accept what he was telling her “on faith.” Well, interruptions can get irritating, but what an opportunity missed, and what an awful misrepresentation of what Christian faith is! I remember trying hard to get the kids in my classes to think about what I was saying, let themselves become curious, and ask questions, but they were well trained already in the folly of imagining that correct answers are knowledge and that getting it right is the goal of education. Honest questions make us vulnerable; they open us to life and to God.

The life of faith is very much a wrestling match with God. Yes, there are breaks and rest times, but then the grappling resumes at the level of our strength. Why? Because God is leading us forward together in the hope and service of the new creation that has emerged in Christ’s resurrection and will not rest until it is completed. Amen.