

“Big Match”

Gen. 32:22-31 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

No one likes a stalemate. We learned that this past week as we watched Democrats and Republicans, grappling and fighting over the fiscal future of our country.

Of course we were all frustrated with the lack of cooperation and rigidity of both sides, but I think what frustrated us the most about this struggle in our government, wasn't that our politicians couldn't get along or because they weren't holding hands and singing "God Bless America" on the steps of the Capitol Building.

What frustrated us the most was that they were at an impasse, they were locked in a stalemate, and no one likes watching a stalemate.

We may hate losing and we may love winning, but watching or being involved in a stalemate is painful and aggravating.

The story we just read is the story of a match, a big match between Jacob and God. The match is long and difficult, and it seems to get stuck in a stalemate, and in the end, there is no clear winner, but the loser receives his reward.

Let's look at the events that have led to this match between God and Jacob.
Jacob has a twin brother named Esau.

Esau, because he came out of the womb just before Jacob, was in line to receive the biggest and best chunk of the inheritance from his father. But Jacob, using his cunning con-man skills is able to fool his father and get the inheritance (or the blessing) meant for Esau.

Esau is enraged and threatens to kill Jacob. So, Jacob flees his home and heads for Haran where his rich uncle Laban lives. Along the way he has a dream about a stairway to heaven and he hears a promise from God that God will take care of his future and will make his descendants into a great nation.

He ends up working for his uncle Laban for 14 years and by the time his contract with Laban is over, he has two wives, two maidservants, eleven children, herds of livestock, slaves and many other resources.

In other words, Jacob is living the dream. He has worked his way to the top, and it's time for him to go out on his own. But what that means is that Jacob will have to face his brother who was breathing murderous threats against him the last time they saw each other.

So, Jacob decides to extend an olive branch and he sends word to his brother that he is coming and hopes that Esau will come to greet him as a friend.

The messengers go with Jacob's message and return saying, "Esau is coming, and he has 400 men with him."

To Jacob, that didn't sound like a friendly welcoming party. It would be like arranging to reconnect with a friend you haven't seen for a while. The day, time and place is set-up, but you hear that your friend is coming with their team of attorneys.

So, it's the night before the meeting. Jacob decides to spend the night on one side of the Jabbok river (eerily similar to Jacob's name) and his family spends the night on the other.

The next morning, he would face his destiny. Would Esau be angry or would a large gift appease his wild, angry brother. No one knew.

And then... a man showed up.

In the classic sitcom, "Welcome Back Kotter," Freddy "Boom Boom" Washington arrives at his Mr. Kotter's classroom late.

"Mr. Kotter! Mr. Kotter!" I'm sorry I'm late, but I was walking to school and suddenly I was surrounded by seven guys..."

“Wait, wait!” says Mr. Kotter, “You were surrounded by *seven* guys Vinny?”

And Vinny says, “Well, it was seven or two, I don’t know.”

Many times our stories, like Vinny’s, tend to be dramatic or inflated to impress someone or to make the account more interesting. We exaggerate the details or add adjectives that draw the listener into the telling of the story.

The account of Jacob wrestling with the mysterious man by the Jabbok River is not guilty of this.

It says that a man (just a man) wrestled with him until daybreak. We don’t know who started it or why it started at all. Perhaps it was because Jacob couldn’t identify the man and the man wasn’t forthright about identity.

Whatever the reason, there are no aikido moves described, no play by play, blow by blow reports, just the simple fact that Jacob wrestled with a man and that he, apparently, was winning the match.

The mysterious man, then pulls out a move unheard of in the world of martial arts, magic and professional wrestling, he dislocates Jacob’s hip.

But Jacob, determined and driven as ever still holds on like a tick holding on to flesh for deer life.

Apparently, at some point during the wrestling match, Jacob figured out that he was up against someone who was different; different in a holy sort of way. And those who were holy, or divine, could do something for him that no one else could do – he could give him a blessing. “I won’t let go until you bless me,” Jacob says. “Not until you bless me.”

This is what Jacob has wanted his whole life. He had wanted it since he was born. He tricked his father and stole it from his brother. He wanted it when he heard from God at the top of a staircase in a dream. He wanted it when he was working for his uncle. He wanted it when he was building a family. He wanted it now, as he waited to face an angry brother.

He wanted a blessing from God.

We’ve lost the meaning of blessing these days. Any more, blessings are perceived as a formality or a nice word that makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

An engaged couple asks for a blessing of the marriage from their parents. A family says a blessing for their dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and peas. A pastor raises his hands before the end of a worship service and says a “benediction,” literally “a good word” ... a blessing.

These are all examples of blessings. They’re good things. They’re nice things. But could you live without them? Probably. Are they worth fighting for? Probably not.

And yet, here we find Jacob fighting all night for a blessing. Why?

Because Jacob felt as if he lacked something. Jacob wanted to know that he had God’s favor. Even though he heard it before several times and had stolen a blessing from his brother – he wanted to know... Did he have God’s approval? Did God really want him, a sneaky, deceiving con-man, to begin a nation?

Tim Madigan was a celebrated star reporter for the Ft. Worth Star Telegram. He had accolades from all over the state and country.

But behind the scenes Tim’s life was in shambles. He wrestled with depression, a failing marriage, and more importantly the torture of knowing that he had never lived up to the expectations of his father. So, the accolades and recognition mattered little to Tim.

“I can’t continue to live this way,” he wrote one day in back in 1997, “I feel so full of shame and depression, anger. My life is slipping away... I want to go back to sleep and sleep the rest of the day. Hide from the world.”

And yet, Tim continued to take medicine, talk to a therapist and pray. But he also did something else: he wrote to Mr. Rogers - *The Mr. Rogers*.

The two had developed a relationship when Tim interviewed Fred Rogers for a piece he was doing. And Tim felt as if he could trust Mr. Rogers (who couldn't?). So, Tim wrote Mr. Rogers a long letter about his own personal pain and the deep longing he has in his heart for his own dad to be proud of him.

“This is the question I have of you this morning, Fred,” Tim wrote, “Will you be proud of me? It would mean a great deal to me if you would.... Will you be proud of me?”

And the letter Tim received from his friend, Fred Rogers set him on the road to true healing:

“Dear Tim, the answer to your question is

YES.

A resounding, YES...

I will be proud of you. I am proud of you. I have been proud of you since first we met... Nothing you could tell me could change my YES for you. Please remember that... I wonder if you realize how special you really are!? Your place in this life is unique – absolutely unique. I feel blessed to be one of your friends....
YES, Tim, YES.

Love, Fred

And from that time on Mr. Rogers correspondence with Tim Madigan was always signed off with IPOY (“I’m Proud of You”)

Now, one of the things we’re trying to do as parents is to teach our sons how to be proud of their accomplishments whether mom or dad says it or not. So, we’re a little light on the “Proud of you” phraseology.

But every man, woman, boy or girl has a need in their heart for the kind of blessing Tim Madigan received and the kind Jacob fought for. We have been hardwired to long for favor from our parents. We have been designed to desire love. We have this intuitive, instinctual, innate curiosity in the

depth of our soul - a curiosity that wonders if we are really and truly loved.

And now, Jacob, had an opportunity to know just that, and he didn’t want to let it go. He would fight through the pain to have that assurance, that favor, that blessing from God.

“What is your name?” the man responds to Jacob’s demand. And Jacob tells him his name. You won’t be called Jacob (Yacob) or “Heel Grabber” any more (which is what “Jacob” means), says the man, instead your name will be, i-sara-el, “Israel,” or “God strives.”

Why the name change instead of a blessing right away? Because God wanted Jacob to always be aware of this: you don’t have to keep trying to get your blessing and you don’t have to keep fighting to get God’s attention. God will wrestle with you. God will engage you. If you want to wrestle with God – God will wrestle with you.

If you want to ask questions, if you want to argue, if you want to doubt, if you want to yell, curse, fight and challenge God; go ahead. God will honor that kind of engagement.

There’s a song by Pierce Pettis that goes like this:

*When you start to doubt if you exist
God believes in you
Confounded by the evidence
God believes in you
When your light burns so dim
When your chances seem so slim
And you swear you don’t believe in Him
God believes you*

Jacob discovered this was true on the day that he could wrestle with God and God wouldn’t be mad, that he wouldn’t die, and that God would keep on believing in him and being proud of him.

“But,” Jacob says, “Now I want to know your name.” Will you let me know your identity? In other words, will you let me know you completely and understand you fully? Will you pull back the curtain, let me look under the hood, open the confidential file, blow away the fog, shine the light,

and sharpen the image... completely. Will you tell me your name?

“Why do you ask for my name?” The man asks. In other words, “Why do you feel the need figure me out, predict what I’m going to do, understand everything I say, or know the reason for everything that happens to you?”

“Why do you ask for my name?”

If God were completely understood, if you could see God, predict what God is going to do and explain everything about God; God would either be The Devil or an idol. And if there were no mystery to God, then there would never be a need for faith.

Brothers and sisters, when we believe in God and decide to follow Jesus, we are invited to engage in a wrestling match. God will engage us and will accept our questions. But sometimes our questions will go unanswered or, as it was with Jacob, they will be met with another question. Because it’s the questions that form faith – not answers.

And these matches we have with God, these moments when we fight and wrestle with the questions that hound us, can be painful and have lasting effects like Jacob’s limp. But they leave us better than if we never wrestled at all. They bring us closer not to understanding God, but they bring us into a closer relationship with God.

Towards the end of seminary, I wrote the following paragraph at the end of a reflection paper:

“What will I call this journey I have taken, this life I have analyzed? Will I point out the frustration, or focus on the struggle? I think I’ll choose to focus on what Jacob noticed with utter amazement: I saw the face of God and God wasn’t mad! I doubted, fought, ranted, raved and clutched to God’s elusive presence, and still God blessed me.”

This is what it means to follow God – to walk, to wrestle and to keep walking... with a limp.