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## “Wrestling with Holiness”

Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14:13-21

I have to admit I’ve never really understood wrestling as a sport. It just seems so raw and primal that I can’t quite understand how you can put rules to it. But apparently you can, and there are any number of different styles and rulesets across the world and across cultures, and we’ve found references to it in so many of the earliest records of peoples all over the world.

I don’t really understand it, and yet I’m fascinated by this particular scene; the story of Jacob wrestling with some divine creature. I just love the thought of god and humanity locked together in this primal sort of combat, somehow coming out even after hours and hours straining their muscles against one another.

Jacob has spent his life leading up to this story in deceit after deceit. He convinces his brother Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew, and then later tricks their father Isaac into giving him his dying blessing, meant for Esau as the firstborn. Then later, after he has married four wives and had 11 children, he convinces his father-in-law to promise him some of his livestock, and then they proceed to try and con each other back and forth so that each might get the most and strongest animals for himself. Eventually, Jacob just packs up everything and takes off in the middle of the night with his family, while his wife Rachel even steals the household gods from her Canaanite father.

So Jacob’s a very rich man, now, and he’s gotten just about everything he has by lying and cheating his way to the top, and now he finds himself about to face his brother Esau again after all these years. He’s sent everything he has on ahead of him along with his wives and children and servants, and here he finds himself alone at the river — alone finally with only his thoughts and his fears, his past perhaps having finally caught up with him. And he wrestles with an unknown man, all through the night.

Most Christian traditions think of this man as an angel, or perhaps even God the divine self. But, some Jewish commentators have suggested that perhaps he’s wrestling with a messenger from his brother, a representative of his past; or even with his own self and the weight of all he has done. He’s spent his life running blindly after money and status, not caring who he hurts on his way there. But now his past has caught him alone, wrestling him to the ground and leaving him wounded but not beaten.

I’m reminded a bit of the movie *Fight Club*, or of that big kid in elementary school who grabs the smaller boy’s hands to hit him with, so he can say, “stop hitting yourself!”

Because in a way, he’s been hitting himself all along, with this single-minded focus on getting ahead, no matter what the cost. Everything he’s done has been working on the assumption that there’s only so much to go around. There’s only so much blessing in the world, so he’d better grab what he can and run.

I think we all know people like that, don't we? Because our culture certainly encourages us to think that way — that there's only so much happiness in the world, only so much love — so when we find it we'd better hang on til our knuckles are white, because if we let that love out of our deathgrip for a minute, someone else is going to snatch it away. And so we wrestle our angels to the ground, trying to wrench the blessing out by force, because God forbid someone might just bless us for who we are.

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Last weekend, we finished the filming of a documentary about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer pastors and future pastors. I'm being featured in it, along with seven of my colleagues who are at various stages of the ordination process. They're beloved friends, and we've been an incredible support network for one another in the midst of a denomination that doesn't quite know what to do with us.

For many people, we're a sign of a church that's lost its way; while for others, we're symbols of hope for people who have lost their faith in the way church has been done in the past. And no matter what your perspective, the eight of us are part of a much larger picture of a church that's changing whether we like it or not. We got sleepy and comfortable in a society where church was an essential part of life — just *what you did* — and now decades later, we've woken up and looked around to find ourselves all of a sudden in a much different world.

It's a world where people have lost patience with checklists of what you have to believe in order to be part of the club; words we've been reciting for so long we don't even know what they mean anymore; with endless debates over who's sinful and who's righteous enough to be here. Over the years, it seems like Christians have put an immense amount of energy into deciding who, precisely, is loved by God, and who is not. The standards have changed over the years (most people don't get quite as worked up as they used to about the exact theology of the sacrament of Communion) but there have just about always been standards.

We wear ourselves out with this; wrestling through the night with adversaries of our own making, until we finally emerge, not victorious exactly, still limping from the struggle, but somehow *blessed*. I'm not sure we always know what that blessing is that we're fighting for, but we've set our minds on it and we'll fight each other tooth and nail for the privilege. Obviously there's not enough blessing to go around, and I've got to get my hands on it!

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But I don't think God works that way. We come back again, today, to this so very familiar story of hungry people being fed. And I'm caught this time by the disciples saying to Jesus, "send the people away, we don't have enough food." Jesus says, no, feed them! And they argue, but there's no food for them. There's barely enough for us. Let them get their own food.

"We don't have enough," they say, but Jesus says, "of course there is enough." Over and over again, we insist that our resources are limited; that God's resources must be limited. If I am to be loved by God, surely we can't *all* be loved. Surely there is not enough room at this table for *everyone* to sit and

eat. Surely we must ration our five loaves and two fishes; surely there is not enough to go around: not enough food, not enough blessedness, not enough of God's love, and so we must decide who is in and who is out so we can assure *ourselves* there will be room for us at God's table.

But what is still so groundbreaking and counterintuitive about this story, all these years later, is that even in the most remote, deserted place, with God's blessing there is still enough for every single person to be fed, and more. There is no need for us to try and keep all the bread for ourselves.

And in fact, if we do try, those five small loaves will barely be enough for us. We'll still wind up hungry, huddled together around this tiny meal.

But Jesus' invitation is about more than food. It's an invitation to a new attitude, a new perspective. It's a recognition that abundance is a state of mind and not necessarily about how much food is on your plate. Most of us in this place don't have to worry too much about where our next meal is coming from, but like Jacob we sometimes struggle with this feeling of never having enough, or never *being* enough — because all around us the culture is telling us we're not enough, just so we'll buy their products and maybe feel whole for a second or two.

Even churches struggle with this. We are convinced that money will make us happy again, that more members will mean we're successful again, blessed again. That God's blessing cannot possibly be present in a world where church doesn't look the way we're used to. That somehow God's blessing is so rare that we must build walls around who can be loved by God and who cannot, so there will be more blessing for us.

And all the while God is standing back, watching us struggle and fight, until finally we pause for breath long enough to hear Jesus' invitation to come, sit, and eat. It doesn't matter if we're right or wrong, or even if we like the people sitting next to us very much. Somehow, against all logic, there's enough food there for us and for our friends and for the people we disagree with and for the people we think don't really deserve to be there; for those we know and don't know, and, still, for *us*.

God's economics do not work like ours. We're used to this zero-sum game where anything more for you means something less for me, and so we keep trying to push God into that mold as well. We keep trying to make God's love work by our rules, because we understand those even if they don't give us life. And yet, over and over and over again, Jesus says "there is enough." Really and truly, there is enough room at this table for you, and for me, and for all of us, but only if we slide over to make room for more.

This was good news on a desert hill outside Nazareth, and it's good news in our food deserts today, and it's good news even for us here in this place, even when we think we don't need to hear it. There is food enough for all of us, and there is blessing enough for each and every one of us.