

BLESSED ARE THE WRESTLERS

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Grace Church in New York
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Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. (Genesis 32:24)

Something I will always remember about my father was the type of wallet that he carried. It was a massive leather thing with a coin purse inside so he could always give the exact change. It had a miniature photo album for generations of family pictures, secret compartments for keys, and a zipper that went all the way around the outside. Fully loaded with coins, pictures, and bills, the wallet must have been more than two-inches thick, and my father never let it out of his sight. It was always in his back pocket, presumably cutting off the circulation to his leg. Every night he would put it under the bed to conceal it from any potential burglars.

Dad was a child of the Great Depression, so his lifelong approach to money was careful and conservative. He was also an Episcopal priest, thus every year it was his lot to preach pledge campaign sermons about giving and sharing and returning to the Lord a portion of our incomes. I can still hear him saying how all that we own belongs to God. We take none of our possessions with us when we die, so don't lay up treasure on earth, where thieves break in and steal. He practiced what he preached, and gave ten-percent of his salary back to the church. As a family we lived modestly, but never wanted.

Ironically, on the day that my father died, his wallet itself would preach the sermon about our spiritual need to maintain a right relationship with our possessions. Dad was nearly 65, and he'd been out playing tennis. He came home and laid down on his bed for a nap. In his sleep he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and never regained consciousness. Mom called the paramedics, who came and carried him down the stairs and to the hospital where he died the next day. We all returned to the house numb with grief, as you can imagine, wondering how to undo the past twenty-four hours. Someone – I don't remember who – went upstairs to my parents' bedroom, and there it was, under the bed: Dad's big, thick wallet, fully loaded and all zippered up, right where he'd stashed it before his nap. It was as if a thief had broken in and stolen him, and left the wallet behind. My father had no more need of it. True to the sermons he preached, he did not take it with him on his final journey.

For me, what followed that snowy, winter weekend over twenty-three years ago was an intense period of wrestling with God. In fact, today's reading from Genesis turned out to be an essential player in calling me back to life. If you recall, the story is about Jacob, who was the son of Isaac and younger brother of Esau. Jacob was a colorful character, no doubt about it. As the second-born son, his place would have been merely to watch his older brother Esau receive the blessing and inheritance of their elderly father, Isaac. But when the time came, Jacob schemed to trick Isaac into blessing him rather than Esau. Jacob stole Esau's birthright, and Esau was furious. In fact, Esau vowed to kill Jacob, so Jacob fled and the two brothers did not see each other for many years. Both prospered, but in today's reading we find Jacob in great fear. He believed that God had commanded him in a dream to return home. When Esau learned that his scoundrel of a brother was approaching, he called together an army of four-hundred men, presumably to fulfill his murderous vow. As Esau approached, Jacob tried to appease him, then sent his family off into safety. That night, *Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

Jacob wrestled with God. The scene certainly raises more questions than it answers. Are we to take it literally or figuratively? Why did God wrestle with Jacob? Why didn't God simply overwhelm Jacob? The text leaves much to the imagination. Still, many people find the notion appealing. We *want* to wrestle with God. At times we want and need to rage at God over the way life unfolds. What Genesis reveals is that God is big enough to take it, and indeed blesses the struggle. God took Jacob so seriously that he climbed into the ring to contend with him on his level. At daybreak God blessed Jacob with a new name: Israel. *"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."* Imagine, the name God gives to his chosen people – the name Israel – means "struggles with God," wrestles with God, contends with God. God blesses those who struggle with him.

We find much the same idea in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told a parable (Luke 18:1-8) about a poor widow with a law suit to settle. But she couldn't get a hearing from the local judge. The judge, who by his own admission neither feared God nor respected people, couldn't have been bothered with the widow's complaint. What did the widow do? She made a major pest of herself, refusing to give the unjust judge a moment's peace. She persevered until he finally gave in, saying, *"because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice."* The word translated here as "bothering" is key. Listen to its meaning in the original Greek: *to inflict continuous blows to the eye. To make black and blue.* Apparently the widow's perseverance included a few left hooks to the judge's eye. It's no wonder the judge finally heard the widow's case and settled in her favor.

On first reading many will assume that the parable contradicts any notion of God's goodness. But with the unjust judge, Jesus was making use of a story-telling technique called an anti-hero. Jesus created a scoundrel, not a saint, to make a point about God. The point is this: if even the unjust judge can eventually do the right thing and be a source of blessing, imagine how much more God takes us seriously, hears our prayers, and showers us with blessings. Jesus said, *"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."* The parable presents an argument from the lesser to the greater. If even the unjust judge can grant justice, then imagine God's greater readiness and willingness to provide for his children.

The witnesses of the grappling Jacob and the sparring widow affirm that God wants to get in the ring and wrestle. God blesses our struggle. Blessed are the wrestlers. This takes me back to my own wrestling with God. I remember the days and weeks of anguish after my father died. In my mind, of course, I knew that we all die and leave our wallets and portfolios behind. But in my heart and soul I raged at God for what I, in my arrogance and grief, judged to be his unacceptable performance at being – well – at being God that weekend. The snowstorm was lovely, but the one broken blood vessel really ruined it. What was coming clear to me was that I loved my father far more than I loved God. Indeed, I loved houses and brothers and sisters and father and mother and children and wallets more than I loved God. God was supposed to protect all these things, not take them away. Even still, I refused to release my grip on the notion that God lives, that God is good, and that God grants justice to those who cry to him day and night. So I wrestled with God, and jabbed my fist in the general direction of heaven.

I was 34 at the time. At one point I recalled that 25 years earlier, when I was nine or ten, my father had been diagnosed with a form of leukemia, and the prognosis was not good. He prayed daily for health and strength from the Lord, and he did not die, but lived and thrived. He was healthy and vigorous. Recalling the memory of that earlier time, it struck me that he could have died when I was a child rather than a young adult. Suddenly, it was as if the scales began falling from my eyes, and like Jacob, I could see God face to face. I could see God not as the dealer of death and denier of blessings, but as the giver of life and source of all love. God was not a thief

who broke in a stole life. God was the author of life who gave it in the first place. Soon I was watching my grief turn into gratitude: gratitude that I'd had my father at all, gratitude for what was probably an additional 25 years of his positive influence on me, gratitude that I too get to share in life and existence. I do believe that I emerged from that period of struggle with a new sense of God's presence, and a stronger, more robust faith. But I have to say, it was the wrestling that opened my eyes to the abundant generosity of God. God blesses the wrestlers!

It's in the context of God's generosity that I wish to talk for a moment about some parish family business: the upcoming annual pledge campaign. Call it the yearly wrestling match with God, if you like. Actually, the Vestry and I would be thrilled if you entered the pledging ring eager for a struggle. Struggle to make a faithful response to God's generosity. Take hold of God, and struggle to give concrete form to your gratitude for all the blessings of this life. The witness of Jacob and the parable of the persistent widow teach that God goes to the mat with us, meets us there, and imparts blessings through the struggle. Next week is Pledge Sunday, and in preparation you should all be receiving in the mail a letter from me, a pledge card, and a brochure. The brochure is entitled "Lift High the Cross," because the annual campaign is an invitation to respond with gratitude to God's offering of himself for us. So your homework is to struggle, really struggle this week with your pledge. Struggle to put a number on how grateful you are to God. Make it a struggle this year, not just a perfunctory thing. Make it a spiritual struggle.

Of course, the annual campaign also has a temporal side to it. Indeed, it's our annual giving that pays the utility bills and keeps the ministries going. So let me highlight the important, strategic role that your annual pledge plays in our work for the Lord. Grace Church anticipates expenses of just over \$3 million in 2020. This year we're stepping out in faith a bit, adding to our staff a full-time position we lost a decade ago: a Communications Manager. Why? Because not only do we want to lift high the cross, we want people to see it. To meet expenses we have three major sources of revenue: income from the Loft Building on the corner of 4th Avenue and 10th Street, a 4-percent draw on the endowment, and annual pledges from you and me. Pledging is key. You see, if pledging is strong, then we can grow in our ability to do God's work. If pledging is strong, we can ease off the endowment so that it can grow in its ability to care for this magnificent building (that I hasten to add is a powerful tool for doing God's work). So pledging is the key. Struggle with your pledge so that Grace Church can be a bright Christian witness in New York City. Struggle with your giving, because when you do, God uses the wrestling to open a channel of blessing.

I still carry the memory of my father's wallet, even the fearful lesson it taught on the day he died. No, you can't take it with you. Better still, I carry the lesson he lived: that what we do take with us is our relationship with the living God, made possible through Jesus when he stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross. Best of all, what I have found to be true and what I am still wrestling to comprehend fully is that in the kingdom of God we never lose each other. 23 years on I experience a living fellowship with my father through the mystery we call the Communion of Saints. Life is changed, not ended. We have a reasonable and holy hope of eternal life with those we love.

Today, let the wondrous witness of Jacob call you to life: *Blessed are the wrestlers, for they shall see God face to face.*