

“Wrestling and Receiving”
Rev. Carol Howard Merritt
First Presbyterian Church
New Canaan, CT
August 2, 2020

Text: Genesis 28:10-19a

Ralph was a successful businessman in Florida, a CFO of a large company, and very involved in his congregation. His activity in the church went beyond the sort of obligations and duties that we know we need to maintain to keep the church running. He had something more than that—he had a deep devotion to his congregation. Ralph never went to church until late in his life, so it wasn’t out of habit that he maintained his connection. I knew it had to be something else.

I asked him why, and he answered me with a story.

You see, Ralph’s son died. It was a nightmare. His son was graduating from high school, and the parents were bubbling with pride. He was extraordinary—athletic, intelligent, and promising. He had just gotten into a wonderful college.

On the very night of the graduation ceremony, his son was out late, celebrating. He drove home, and just blocks away from his house; he ran into a tree. Ralph’s son died instantly.

Ralph scrambled, trying to figure out what to do with the turmoil of emotions inside of him. And then a man named Cliff, someone he barely knew from his wife’s church, called Ralph up right after the funeral and asked, “You want to jog with me tomorrow morning?”

Ralph was not a runner and he certainly was not a morning person. He had played football in high school, but had never exercised much since then, and he had no interest in jogging at all. And even though it was the last thing on earth that Ralph wanted to do, for some reason, he surprised himself by accepting the invitation.

And so, Ralph and Cliff, these two quiet men, began to run together every single morning. With each step that they took, Ralph questioned everything. As they passed through the neighborhoods, and made their way to the riverside boardwalk, Ralph jogged through his anger and depression. As they watched the sun rise over the green water, Ralph bargained and doubted. He talked about his marriage and his daughter. He questioned the existence of God. He wondered about the meaning of life, and he wondered about the meaninglessness of life.

“You wouldn’t believe how much we talked. I have never talked that much with anyone. He got me through it,” Ralph explained. “He got me through an impossible situation.” Now, to me the beautiful thing about this story, is that Cliff didn’t just run with Ralph for a week and it was done. Cliff was there, by Ralph’s side, every morning, for over *ten years*.

Cliff wrestled with Ralph. He gave him the time, the space, and the excuse to hash out an internal barrage of emotions.

We all go through times of intense emotions, intense wrestling, within ourselves and with loved ones. This is not only a part of life, but it is a deep and meaningful part of our spiritual lives. The point of the spiritual life is not to separate the bad from the good, and then concentrate on ignoring all the negative things. Our lives of faith are often full of doubt, anger, grief, questions, and struggle.

Too often we have been told that to be a successful human means that we ought to focus on the positive, ignore the struggles, put away the questions, and that will somehow lead us to a state of peace and euphoria. But this means that we have to pretend that some of our deepest struggles do not exist. And the emotions do not go away. Instead, they come out sideways. We end up with bubbling, passive aggressive behavior, or a rage that comes uncorked with violent fury, or an addiction that we slip into so that we don't ever have to feel.

So, what should we do with the struggles in life?

One of the gifts that the Hebrew Bible gives us is brutal honesty. It seems like every family is dysfunctional in there. The writers didn't hide any of it. Jacob is one of those characters in the scriptures that we see raw and exposed. It's like a season of Succession. When Jacob is born, he clutches onto his twin brother's heel on the way out of the womb. We learn how conniving Jacob is when he steals his Brother's inheritance. We see his treachery, when he lies to his father when his dad is dying. You will find his vindictive nature. In one of those stories that we skip over in Sunday school, we learn that Jacob's daughter was raped by a prince in the region, then the perpetrator wanted to marry her. Jacob said that he would allow her to be married on one condition, that every male in the prince's city had to be circumcised. They were all circumcised, and then when they were in the midst of their pain, Jacob's sons killed all the men, and plundered the city.

Among all of this, you will find God's blessing. Jacob has powerful dreams. He sees the angels ascending and descending a ladder up to heaven. And then there is this strange story about Jacob—the one that Angela read—when he was alone one evening, a man came to him, and wrestled with him. They wrestled all night, until finally the stranger knew that Jacob would prevail, and so he hit Jacob's hip, and it was pulled out of joint.

When the morning came, the strange man said that he needed to go, but Jacob said that he would not let him go until he received a blessing. The stranger changed his name to Israel and said that he striven with God and with humans. Jacob had wrestled with God. He woke up, limping, with a bad hip and a great blessing.

These dreams and night visits are so interesting. And what I think we can learn from them, and from the larger sordid life of Jacob, is that somehow even as he wrestled with God, he demanded a blessing from God.

So often our message in the church is, “Be a good person and God will bless you. Be a good Christian, and you will have a life that is full of peace, and free from all negative emotions.” But this does not seem to be the message that overarches Jacob’s life. It’s more like, **“You will wrestle with life and even God. And at the end of it, you better demand a blessing.”**

In our own lives, there are times when we find ourselves wrestling. We struggle with our faith. There are times when fighting, questioning, doubting, being angry—all of these things will be a part of our spiritual lives. Sometimes the wrestling will be brought on by huge life events, but other times, they will be small things that happen. There will be times when we fall apart. There will be moments in our lives when we will wrestle, struggle, fight, question, and doubt God, even at our very core.

And it’s okay, because we learn from Jacob’s unusual life that God is a wrestler too. And God will still be there in the morning after the struggle, and God will bless us. Just like Cliff, who ran beside Ralph every day, God will be there at the end of it. God will hold us.

This is my last Sunday with you all. I have been shredding, and sorting, and packing. This week, I’ll be moving out of the manse and putting my things in storage, until my next call opens up. And I want you to know how much I have enjoyed each day that I have been able to work with you and struggle with you. I have to admit though... this whole pastor-thing can be kind of cruel. I have grown to love many of you so deeply, and now it’s time for me to move on.

But I want to leave you with this. You have been through a great deal as a congregation, and I think that Jacob’s wrestling is a beautiful metaphor for the past three years. You have spent years wrestling, and in the months to come, as Mary steps into the pulpit, and then Scott becomes your pastor, you’ll be waking up. Your hip is a little wonky; it’s been dislocated. You are not the same congregation that you used to be. And yet, I believe that God’s steadfast presence has been with you all. And even with the struggles and the wrestling, God will bless you. And God will give you a new identity as you move forward.

So, let us go out, with the strange knowledge that God is with us, and God is moving and working in our deepest struggles and doubts.

To the glory of God our Creator,
God our Liberator,
And God our Redeemer. Amen.