

Winfield United Church Reflection – August 2, 2020
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Transformed by wrestling

Genesis 32: 24

Jacob was left alone, and wrestled with a man there until the breaking of the day.

I believe all of us wrestle with something, or someone, from time to time. It may not occur to us that when we are wrestling with our demons or our doubts or our patterns that disturb us that we are wrestling with God presence within us, as Jacob believed. Or that in the wrestling, we can grow and be transformed. This story can also be understood as a metaphor: Jacob's inner struggles are as if he was struggling with a man.

There is a wonderful chart with four quadrants that goes something like this:

beginning at the top: unaware of self then unaware of others.

Unknown to self because the ego always kicks in by being defensive or argumentative.

Across the bottom is: aware of self and aware of others. Known to self is my desire to embrace change, which may not be obvious when old patterns kick in.

For many decades I had little self awareness and little awareness of others needs, especially emotional needs. Now that I'm becoming more self-aware and more aware of the needs of others, I'm doing a lot of wrestling.

- I'm still wrestling with a lot of guilt over a failed marriage, for which I bear more than 50% responsibility.
- I wrestle with my past wherein I was a successful politician at election time and my success was due in part to being a workaholic, a public face at the expense of my family. So I wrestle with guilt and wishing I could have done things differently.

What keeps us up at night?

What are we embarrassed or unable to talk about?

What do you wrestle with?

How do we wrestle with feeling so alone? Confused? Abandoned by the God of our understanding?

As a loving faith community, we can share each others' burdens and what we have in common.

Perhaps you wrestle with:

- why me? When we wrestle with a diagnosis we are wrestling with waiting in fear.
- a relationship that was never healed, and still causes us pain
- a health condition or diagnosis and we are faced with some painful choices

Where and how have we wrestled?

- Do we just take another “drink” and hope it goes away?
- Do we take a sleeping aid so we can sleep and not wrestle?
- Do we chose our words carefully so we don't “over speak” or hurt someone else?

Jacob struggled, came out limping and yet declared that he had seen God face to face. Have we had this experience? Or could we say:

“Wow, that was a divine encounter.”

Or, “I learned so much from that. If I hadn't struggled I would not have the insights into my behaviour and my relationships, including my relationship with the divine.”

In the telling of this story it says four times that Jacob was wrestling with a man. At the end of the telling it says that the place will be called “Peniel” meaning: I have seen God face to face.

Was Jacob wrestling with a man or was it only after the encounter that he believed that he was wrestling with God?

How have we, and, how are we transformed by our encounters with the divine?

Jacob learned that reconciliation can be difficult. He was afraid that his brother Esau was still angry with him for cheating him out of his birthright. Yet when they met his brother refused to accept his gifts. As it turned out, his wrestling all night with a stranger was more difficult than the actual meeting or reunion with his brother.

What acts of reconciliation are we avoiding? Might the avoidance be more painful than the actual reconciliation?

Jacob arises in the morning reassured. God has given him a powerful message: If he can prevail against a divine being, he has no reason to fear his own brother.

And us? If we can wrestle with God? If we can argue with God, like Job, then we too can face anything. And how do we pray? I imagine Jacob finally, through the long night, turning to God and having a real conversation:

“WTH-why do I have to have to keep fighting Esau, and if I don't, he wins, I die. I don't want to fight.”

“Help! Help! I'm frightened, and guilty. I know I stole his birthright. I'm afraid and might as well be punished for betraying my brother.”

We too, can have a real conversation with the God of our understanding: “Help! Help! I can't find peace! I don't know how to make amends! I've dug myself into a hole and I can't get out!”

Jacob had a very flawed character. He was out for himself and trying to cheat others. Yet God did not punish Jacob, instead, his character was challenged and reshaped. So much so, that he was given a new name: Israel, which means God-wrestler.

The Good News is that in the life of faith, there is no model to which we must conform and submit. God entertains and loves all kinds of characters and personalities.

I conclude with a poets questions:

Because I journeyed too close to the event horizon
because I dreamed deeper than REM and hallucination
because I half-nelsoned the mystery into self-revelation
because I knew silent stillness is not the only holy way

I limp with a hip socket struck by marvelous pain
I limp with an ego wounded and the wound a blessing
I limp a survivor from a close encounter with the other
I limp slower and wiser, purple hearted from the battle

I could have walked briskly away from the one hiding among us
I could have danced on with a smooth sliding stroll
I could have run tremulous from the infinite unknowable
I could have feigned my gait as if I were free of divine wrestling

Do you walk hiding all your out-of-joint questions and doubts?
Do you slip away from the ring when the bell sounds three?
Do you hide from the God who would rather have a wrangle?
than let you walk on without knowing you are known?

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Inspiration and Ideas:

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