

Wrestlemania

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Lessons for Pentecost 20, Proper 24 in Year C

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14--4:5

Luke 18:1-8

I used to be a wrestler. I bet you didn't know that. You don't exactly look at me and say to yourself, "Hey, I bet Keith used to be a wrestler." You probably think that the only thing I've ever wrestled on a regular basis has been bad writing in a Microsoft manual.

And yet, I used to be a wrestler. *Cheryl* didn't even know this about me until I started preparing this sermon. It's one of those things I never had any real reason to talk about. You see, I wasn't on the wrestling team when I was at SU. Nor was I on the wrestling team at East Orange High School - come to think of it, I don't even remember if we had one. I definitely wasn't on the Ashland School wrestling team, although my K-8 years there were the reason I was a wrestler.

You see, I was your classic 98 pound weakling. I was always getting beat up on. Well, not quite - the bullies in my class rotated between me and Nancy Winograd. She got picked on on even days, and I got the odd ones. Anyway, after years and years of seeing me getting beat up by just about everyone, my parents finally decided to do something about it. They enrolled me in a wrestling class at the Y.

And I was quite good at it. I knew all the moves. I could pin just about anyone you put me up against. There was just one problem though, that my parents didn't quite grasp. The problem was that learning the *sport* of wrestling was not exactly going to help me out in the world of self defense, because when you all of a sudden find yourself facing Robert Mason again at the corner of Clinton Street and Melmore Gardens, he's not interested in assuming the standard starting positions of wrestling. In fact, he's gonna punch your lights out before you can even suggest it.

So wrestling was as useful for me in self defense, as algebra was in my love life. No wait, algebra actually *was* useful in my love life - but that's a different story.

I said that I *used to be* a wrestler. On the sport level that's true. I haven't done any wrestling in a good 30 years. But I still am a wrestler of another kind, and I love today's Old Testament lesson for that reason. For I've been wrestling like Jacob for most of my life.

Jacob wrestled with God for one night, and would not let go. I've wrestled with God ever

since I was old enough to understand that there are many contradictions, some obvious, some quite subtle, in our understanding of God, how God works, and what God wants. Contradictions not only between what we read in the Bible and what we see for ourselves in the world, but contradictions also between different sections of the Bible itself.

I've wrestled with God over these for a good long time, probably since I was about 10-years-old. And you can bet I've been doing some heavy duty wrestling over the past two weeks. Yet, like Jacob, I will not let go. At least not until he blesses me.

What contradictions, what problems? Do we actually admit to them? If we don't admit to them, if we find some way to paper over them, then our theological life is all nice and neat, nice and safe, and we don't have to wrestle. But if we're honest with ourselves - and with God - and admit that we perceive contradictions and problems, then we're set up for a nice long wrestling match.

But you know something? Wrestling is a *contact* sport. This means that to wrestle with God, you have to also come in contact with God.

And yet, some don't get to come into this contact with God, even though they perceive the problems and contradictions. Actually, some don't come into this contact with God *precisely because* they perceive these problems and contradictions. They take these problems as signs that God *doesn't* exist - because in their mind, if God *did* exist, we would live in a perfect universe, and there would be none of these issues to contend with.

It's funny though. When you think about it, when you really think about it, the people who paper over the problems with God, and those who say that there are too many problems for God to exist, are pretty much cut from the same cloth. Because if the paperers were to honestly admit to *any* problem with God, their faith would melt faster than an ice cube in a microwave, and they would end up with those who say that there are too many problems for God to exist.

And yet the real problem here, with both groups, is that their idea of God is too small. They're working with a 3rd-grade version of God that needs to be re-examined every few years, and they've never learned to wrestle. Or at best, they both see the wrestling mat as some cheesy, smelly, undignified place far removed from the certainty they *think* they have. Wrestling is certainly a problem for people who need to have a clear black and white answer.

But I say, as did Jacob, "I will not let you go until you have blessed me. I will be here all night. I will be here the rest of my life. You don't get rid of me that easily." Let's take a look at some of the things I wrestle with, and see if they're some of the same things you wrestle with.

First and foremost on my list is "Why do you make us so darned stupid so that we don't always get what you're talking about? And then why do you seem to get mad at us when we don't get it?" This is most clearly demonstrated in Jesus's many interactions with the disciples - time and time again, they don't get it, and yet time and time again *he* doesn't seem to understand their limitations.

If anyone *he* should be aware of just how inherently clueless they are.

Next up is, "Why don't you just talk to us all in a way we'll understand clearly?" This is quickly followed by "Why don't you make it easy for those of us who want to do your will to know whether or not we're doing it, instead of having us constantly puzzling over which permutation of which religion is closest to what you want?" This is probably the main stumbling block for most people who can't believe in God. They can't deal with the fact that God doesn't make what he wants perfectly obvious to everyone so that there's no arguing about it. Related to this is the big one I've been wrestling with ever since September 11th - "Why do you let us do absolutely horrible things to each other in your name? Why do you allow your name to be dragged through the mud like this, instead of correcting us?"

Then there's "Why don't you give the resources to those of us who want to help others, and why do you allow vast resources to land in the laps of those who, at best don't seem to care, and at worst will use them to harm others?"

We all know the big wrestling match between evolution and creationism. At least we *think* we do. Fact is that most of us probably only know of the extreme positions of both camps, but not of the middle ground that says that God could well have used evolution as his tool for creating us. But even that middle ground has its share of problems for us to wrestle with.

For example, did God make the universe perfect, and then somehow our sin (because we were stupid) caused things like disease and natural disaster to enter into the

picture? Or did God intentionally create the universe with just enough inherent randomness to not only allow us free will, but to also allow all kinds of other things to happen, that we don't always think of as good? If the second is the case, then is homosexuality merely just one of those possible random variations, or do we still see it as the result of a fallen creation?

And, to paraphrase Sonny and Cher, the list goes on. There are so many other things that I wrestle with. And I will not let go. I will not let go even though God hasn't been very forthcoming with any answers.

Why won't I let go? Is it fear? Is it faith? Is it sheer Gatling stubbornness? Or is it some combination of the three?

Well, let's not discount the old Gatling stubbornness. If you know me, Devra, or anyone else in my family, you know that we Gatlings can be pretty stubborn, and will do something just because you said it couldn't be done. But I don't think that's all of it.

Is it fear? In a way yes, but not the way you're thinking. It's not a fear of being smitten by God for not having enough faith and giving up too soon, for not being good enough. It's a fear of not hanging on long enough to get the answers that I know are out there. It's a fear of missing out on the big prize because I gave up too soon.

So from that fear, I guess you can say it boils down to faith. The faith I have that there *are* answers to these questions. The faith I have that at some point God *will* make all the apparent contradictions make sense. The faith I have that if I just hold on long enough, God *will* show me the big equation that makes everything work out in the end, that he'll show me the beautiful

front of the tapestry instead of the ugly knotted back that I've been looking at for the past 45 years.

And for all its messiness, for all the annoyances it brings, for all the uncertainty involved, I will continue wrestling, and will not let go until he blesses me. Even though there are times, like right now, when I just want to throw in the towel and walk away.

I mentioned in the beginning that as far as self-defense went, wrestling was pretty useless. But you know, maybe it wasn't. Maybe had I just thought enough to try to get Robert Mason on the ground somehow, I could've won for once and the after school battles would be over once and for all.

With that in mind, I'm thinking that learning to wrestle could be quite useful for the self-defense of your faith - especially if you're young and on your way to college. There are a lot of cults out there, even Christian cults, who will tell you that they have the answer, and who will play upon the unwillingness a lot of people have to wrestle with their faith. They'll point out all the contradictions to you, and then give you *their* prepackaged answer that you don't have to wrestle with - at first.

There are people who will tell you that if you have enough faith, you'll never have to wrestle, and that wrestling is a sign of a *lack of faith*. You can take that and spread it on your lawn. I know that *my* wrestling is not about a lack of faith in God, but rather

about my honestly acknowledging how little I understand. I cannot wrestle *with* God unless I have faith in God to begin with.

And as I think more about it, I'm convinced that we *have to* wrestle with God, that we can't just sit there comfortable that we know exactly what God is all about. Because God is so much bigger than us, it's impossible for us to grasp all that he is in the first place. And because we cannot possibly grasp all that God is, we *have to* wrestle with the parts we don't understand.

Even the people who think they don't have to wrestle, who have seemingly constructed a perfect explanation of all that God is and wants, get thrown when new information comes their way that doesn't fit in with their model. At that point they have to decide to either wrestle, paper over it, or bail out altogether. My hope is that they learn to wrestle, and become stronger by doing so.

I cannot possibly stress enough how important it is that we wrestle with our faith, and be honest with God and others about our wrestling. Because as I said earlier, wrestling is a *contact* sport, and by wrestling with our faith we come into contact with God, whether we hear him speaking to us at the moment or not.

I wrestle with God, and I will not let go until he blesses me.

Go and do likewise.