Sermon: “Struggle and Blessing”

There is something about the story of Jacob that is universal. It is a story of struggle, of desire, of a strategy to survive and eventually thrive, or defeats and victories. One thing we note in reading through the lifelong tale is that Jacob’s original sin of deceit of his brother continues to haunt his life. He spends a whole life always looking over his shoulder for the enemies he has created, like one of those wanted criminals living life under an assumed identity. The existential question is who is Jacob’s real enemy?

That reminds me of the much quoted statement from Pogo Possum of the Everglades Swamp, a comic strip creation of the late Walt Kelley. Kelley a very creative comic artist borrowed from a well-known message sent in 1813 from U.S. Navy Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry to Ohio’s own Army General William Henry Harrison at the Battle of Lake Erie. Perry wrote triumphantly to Harrison, “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.”

Pogo while traipsing through Florida swamps with his friends face the man-made obstacles of trash overtaking the Everglade forests. Pogo quips, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” That got him adopted by Earth Day and the environmental consciousness movement.

“We have met the enemy, and he is us.” A lot of us can identify with that from a lot of different aspects of our lives. Jacob had been his own worst enemy much of his life. And yet, God loved him and had a plan for the future which involved Jacob’s work as a father and patriarch.

As the story before today’s part of the story indicates, Jacob knew he had to make amends with his estranged brother Esau, who now was a man of power and strength. Esau had an army of men at his command. He was in a position of strength and had no need to seek peace with his little brother, Jacob.

So on the night before Jacob hopes to finally put animosities away between them, but filled with anxiety no doubt, he has laid plans to divide his retinue and his flocks. If Esau attacks the one, maybe the other will escape harm.

Then that night, Jacob remains alone on the same side of the river as the advancing party of his brother, having sent his two wives, and all his children and servants to stay behind on the other side.

“Jacob was left alone,” says Gen. 32:24. That is often where we find ourselves in that darkest moment. We are left with all of our own anxieties, our doubts and fears. When we are most vulnerable, is when God stands the greatest chance of helping us. So “the man” of vs. 25 appears and wrestles with Jacob until daylight. Many scholars of the time and even now interpret this “man” as an angel messenger from God. Jacob later concludes in vs. 30 that he has “seen God face to face” and yet lives to tell about it. One might suggest that an all night wrestling match with the Almighty would likely be to one-sided to last that long. So perhaps God coming in human form would make it a slightly more odds on match. My money would still be with the angel/God, but to his credit, Jacob apparently is quite worthy in a hand to hand tussle, perhaps proving he could handle his brother one on one. The man/angel only prevails at dawn by playing dirty, if such can be said. He strikes Jacob in such a way as to throw his hip out of joint. That had to hurt. But still Jacob will not give up, “unless you bless me,” he says.

Now as a reader I have to ask here, why would Jacob ask this powerful stranger to “bless him?” That was something asked of your father, which he indeed did, or your king, or of God. Maybe this indicates that Jacob had a sense he was fighting a battle with forces well outside his human domain.
The super-natural wrestler asks Jacob to state his name. Jacob he says. Not any more, you are not, says the stranger, now you will be called “Isra-el,” meaning “you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Almost comically, Jacob asks his wrestling opponent’s name, though I think he knows as this point he is dealing with no mere mortal. Our doubts often lead us to keep asking, “Is that you speaking to me, Lord?” Here, the receipt of a blessing, tells Jacob once and for all he is dealing with the Holy One, who sent his grandfather Abraham into the wilderness and made promises to his father Isaac.

Why does God wrestle with Jacob? Why does God initiate the all night fight? Because he can. God acts where God will and sees the need to. That is Scripture’s message. When you are chosen by God, God will do what is takes to move you through your struggles to a place of peace and oneness.

When you read your August newsletter, you will read a personal story of mine from when I accepted a wrestling challenge with a much bigger, stronger classmate at age eight. I suffered a humiliating defeat. Yet, through the agony of defeat, we often find ourselves more truly. What did Jesus say paradoxically? To save your life, you must lose it.

Celia Marshall in an adult study on Genesis writes that Jacob’s “encounter that night [was] a dangerous one.” In the Chinese language, the character for “danger” is the same as the one for “opportunity.” Danger and opportunity are flip sides of the the coin. This crisis situation for Jacob turned out to be a life changing opportunity for him and for God.

We are all struggling with something or perhaps multiple issues at the same time. I learned in 3rd grade to avoid lop-sided physical combat, at least for the time being. I found out later in life, it’s much harder to avoid the psychological and spiritual wrestling matches. You cannot run from yourself, or more importantly, from God. Many are trying rather constantly. Many of us are running away from the match or staying in denial that any such struggle needs to occur. Again, Pogo said prophetically, “We have met the enemy, and he is us [or I might add, she is us too].”

We are not meant to avoid the struggle. We are meant to let God engage us in winning the victory over the darkness, even within ourselves. Jacob did not quit his struggle that dark night. He endured and prevailed. God does not quit on us either, but grants us the Grace of God – sometimes, after a long struggle whether over alcohol or other abuse or addiction, or unhealthy pride, or arrogance, or violence against ourselves or others, or whatever our sin of choice might be.

In his book, In the Grip of Grace, Max Lucado writes about “the Civil War of the Soul.” Many if not most of us find times in our lives when we are at war with ourselves, and by implication, with God. Even the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 7, “when I want to do good, evil is there with me. In my mind, I am happy with God’s law. But I see another law working in my body, which makes war against the law that my mind accepts…the other law…makes me a prisoner.”

Long after Jacob’s time, Paul became convicted that God had sent a new means of saving grace. “Who will save me from this body that brings me death?” asked Paul. He answered himself, “I thank God for saving me through Jesus Christ our Lord.” I do not think that Paul meant that our “body” is bad and deadly – though certainly it is mortal. I think he meant that Christ came as God in human form to show us how we can live more closely for God through the addressing the issues that separate us from the love of God and we struggle with unnecessarily without God when Christ and the Holy Spirit are available to aid us in spiritual recovery and victory.
There is so much we can do with the grace of God. We are not meant to walk away from our struggles and challenges but to engage in the “good fight” with the saving power of Jesus Christ on our side.

You sometimes here people say, “there but for the grace of God go I.” That seems a bit self-righteous to me. I think a more appropriate attitude might be, “there [into that struggle] I will go with the grace of God and the strength and courage of Jesus Christ at my side.” Lord, keep us engaged in the struggle for your righteousness and justice and a sense of peace that only you can give us.

Alleluia! Amen.