

Problem: What does perseverance/struggling with God mean?

-I have vivid memories of as a kid wrestling with my Uncle Jeb. Whenever we would go visit them in Baraboo, WI a lot of times it would turn out being me and my cousin Jake on the floor trying to get on top of who seemed at the time the big, muscular, bearded, woodsman of an uncle. He was a master at wrestling and always falling on us (carefully) and “trapping us” under what seemed to a 6 year old boy a “massive” amount of weight which he always made a challenge getting on top of. Sometimes my aunt and uncle’s chocolate lab would get into this wrestling match and Jake and I would finally be able to persevere in getting on top thanks to Uncle Jeb would be so distracted by the dog licking his face and trying to burrow underneath him.

-Even though these wrestling matches were always playful, I remember vividly the feeling of my legs being “pinned” under my uncle and them not being able to move. I remember the struggle of pushing with all of my strength of get him off and/or trying to wiggle my way out before he would grab me with his giant arms and pull me into another holding position. I never was scared, in fact I loved it! But, sometimes I remember my 6 year old self being frustrated in rarely getting on top of my uncle.

-I have lived a little bit more life since those days of wrestling with my Uncle Jeb. I have grown a little bigger and my Uncle has grown a little grayer now-a-days. The notion of “struggle” has gotten a little more complex for me in my life than just “getting on top of my uncle”. But, when I feel like I am wrestling with something mightily, many times I think back to that feeling of “pushing my uncle with all my strength”.

-In both the parable of Luke and in the story of Jacob, we have vivid examples of wrestling and struggling with God. I think this is really important as sometimes it seems like we don’t really know how or that it’s OK to struggle with the Divine. I know many times I have been asked genuinely by some how I can not have any doubts about God which I guess means that when you become a pastor all of your struggles with God cease. In case you were wondering, your doubts and struggles do not cease when you become a pastor. Many times I still feel like I am just about to get “on top” only to be pulled down and held tight once again.

-Struggle is real, especially struggle with God. So how do these texts reveal this real struggle with God? How do these texts give us permission to struggle with God?

Solution: Struggling in relationship with someone opens up a new identity

-One thing I know I have said again and again but want to say once more because it is so important. I have noticed we tend to think of many biblical characters as tall, white, chiseled, Zeus-like figures that are strong and true. There can’t be anything further from the truth. Remember this summer and our “fearless” prophet Jonah who was actually a coward and who pouted his way to the end of the book? Noah drank too much alcohol. Moses had a severe speech impediment. King David was an adulterer. Elijah was suicidal. Rehab was a prostitute. Samson was a womanizer. And Jacob.....well... Jacob

was a special case. In many Jewish traditions, Jacob is the “deceiver.” He used deception twice to get what he wanted. In the first case, he deceived his brother into selling his birthright as the firstborn for just a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34). This birthright meant a double share of the family inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17). Then when Isaac (his father) was about to formally pass the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant to Esau, Jacob went along with his mother Rebekah's plan to deceive Isaac into passing it to him instead (Genesis 27:1-29; 28:3-4). Of course, Esau was outraged and pursued Jacob (which is where our OT story today picks up). Jacob is in the process of going to meet Esau (where it is not clear if he may be killed by his brother or not) and in typical fashion for him, he sent his two wives, two maids, eleven children, and everything he owned on ahead of him which is actually one of the most cowardly things you can do: send everything you own and your own family to possibly get slaughtered to save your own skin.

-So Jacob isn't really what we would call your great “role model of a prophet”. Yet, here is the powerful part of this story, I think. In his wrestling with God, he is given a blessing in a new name. Now, we might think this is weird in our context, so remember that in the culture of the ancient middle east a name was everything. A name was the tribe you belonged to. A name elevated your unique character traits. A name brought you honor or shame. A name revealed your character. “Jacob” means “holder of the heel” which kinda hints at this person's shortcomings. However, “Israel” literally means “struggling with God” except it's a positive connotation so it's also “struggling and prevailing with God”. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (verse 28) Jacob is given a new name and in receiving a new name he is given a new *identity*. Here's this incredibly flawed individual who by many accounts is a deceiver and a coward. But he at least has the courage to struggle with God. And in struggling with God, he has been given a new identity.

-I have talked with a lot of family members following the death of a loved one. There are always an incredibly array of emotions still happening immediately after death and everyone handles those emotions differently. However, in my young career as a pastor, I have begun to notice a certain theme. The struggle of caring for a loved one who is on the verge of death is something that is incredibly personal and hard. But more often than not, I have talked with family members who say that this struggle has changed who they are and how they see life. It has changed their priorities and in some cases woken them up to new priorities. Their identities changed.

-Now this argument can also be a little “pollyanna esc” if pushed: “well just submit to the struggling with God and you will be changed.” Well, if you notice there is something important in this story that gets missed a lot: “When the man (God) saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But

Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." God is asking to be "let go" here. Isn't that kinda crazy? Then Jacob demands a new identity. Here is the thing that I think it's important for all of us to understand: sometimes we need to not let God go.

Sometimes in our struggle we need to demand a new identity from God. Sometimes we need to be the ones to hold God to task a little bit.

Implication: How does our new identity out of struggle with God relate to our troubled world?

-We are highlighting "Bread for the World" Sunday this morning and I think that this can be a great excuse in "not letting God go" on a global level. What does it mean to struggle with God and demand a new identity not just for ourselves, but for our world? In some ways I feel overwhelmed like Jacob not knowing if he is going to die when he meets his brother who is in pursuit. Sometimes I just kinda want to send everything I've got on ahead saying: "I can't deal with this." 1 in 7 Americans or 48 million people in the United States struggle with some form of hunger. 12 million families have to navigate this issue everyday.

-Hunger isn't even the only problem that our world is dealing with right now either. It's like as a world we can't manage to get on top of "Uncle Jeb" and keep getting pulled back.

-But here is where I find the good news: Genesis 33: "Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you." Esau could have killed Jacob right then and there, yet did not. Instead there is forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope.

-When we become so embroiled and weighed down by our struggling with our God and with problems that seem to overtake us, this is the promise I think we have to hold onto in our new identity. This is the promise that we can't let go of. There will be answers. There will be hope. There will be peace.

-Let us as a church help and support one another, in each of our own struggles, and remind each other that our new identity which comes out of worry, despair, and anger is still very much possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.