

Once again, as I was confronted with the marvelous story about Jacob in our first reading for today, I was taken back to my childhood days when on Saturday morning I would turn on Big Time Wrestling and watch the likes of Bobo Brazil and Stan “The Man” Stasiak battling with each other, while crowds of people cheered them. I was so intrigued by this memory that I decided a few days ago to consult You Tube videos to help me remember the particulars of these matches. (After all, I had a sermon to write.) Wow! Was it bad television, really bad television! Why would I have found that interesting? Somewhat like the election shenanigans of the current era, it was entertainment, but really bad entertainment. It was so phenomenally fake. I know that this is going to really unsettle you who watch the WWF today, but there was nothing real about it.

People often--unfortunately for those fans of high school and college wrestling—associate wrestling with fakery. But that may be too bad for us today as we confront a wrestling match at the River Jabbok between Jacob and another man, who later seems to be identified as a divine figure. Jacob is at a point of crisis. He had battled with his twin brother, Esau, from the very beginning of his life, struggling even to be the first one out of the womb. With his Mom’s help—he had always been a momma’s boy--he stole the family inheritance away from Esau, tricking his Dad into to giving it to him. The Bible tells us that “Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his Father had blessed him, and Esau, [therefore], said to himself, ‘I will kill my brother Jacob.’”

Right before that which is our first reading for today, Jacob has another run-in with one of his relatives, an odd duck uncle named Laban. Continuing what he was so gifted at, Jacob deceives Laban into giving him money. So he then runs from Laban who chases after him and beats him up. (You think your family is dysfunctional!) After Laban and Jacob have a little meeting with each other, Jacob decides that it is time to send a message to his brother Esau. Obviously, things aren’t

going so well with other members of the family, so maybe he needs to connect again to Esau. Jacob sends a message to Esau and with the message lots of presents. Nothing like the Corvette to buy off an angry relative!

Jacob then hears back that, actually, Esau is on his way to him. And he has 400 of his closest, burliest friends coming with him. He's got an army, and they will be after Jacob to kill him. What should he do? Well, he sends two wives, two maids, his eleven children, and everything they have, across the river, anticipating that Esau will meet them before he gets to him and be softened by the women and the children. Perhaps they will temper his anger. And Jacob goes back to the other side of the river, providing a little more space between him and the in-coming angry Esau. And on that side of the river he was all alone, at which time he was ambushed by a man who engaged him in a wrestling match.

Now this wrestling match was no small two minute competition. This was a battle in the muck and the mud that went on for hours. They rolled, they punched, they kicked each other. They tried to pin one another. They probably even tried to rub each other's face in the dirt. At one point, Jacob's opponent caught on to the fact that he wasn't going to prevail. So he resorted to a low blow and struck Jacob on the hip socket. And Jacob would never be the same again. He forever would have a limp. But this low blow was not enough to grant him the victory. Jacob was too persistent.

Isn't it interesting the role that crisis plays in our lives? Isn't it fascinating that we can go along just fine, maybe not dealing with ourselves, with life, perhaps even God, until we are taken to the river of crisis? Crisis forces us to deal with so much. Jacob had been living into his name, which means the deceiver, the trickster. His name describes what he had been up to. And now, backed into a corner, he was forced to wrestle, first of all, with himself. He had to face himself, what he had been up to. I like what Richard Rohr said this past week: "Spiritually speaking, no one else is your problem. You are, first and foremost, your

own problem." Crisis often will cause us to have to deal with ourselves. Everybody else is not the problem. Esau is not the problem, Jacob. You are! It's time to face up to yourself.

Now I am not recommending crisis, by the way. I am not at all one who thinks that suffering automatically makes us better people. Honestly, sometimes it makes us bitter people. And sometimes crisis pushes some people more deeply into their denial, their refusal to face life as it is and who they are. But crisis sometimes has this ability to slap us in the face, get us off of our high horses, force us to discover what truly is important in life. Richard Rohr suggests that this kind of crisis is "necessary suffering." It's what we have to go through in order for us to get better, to become healthier, in order for us to discover what truly matters in life, who we *really* are, not who we pretend to be or want others to think we are.

I have experienced many deaths in my life, within my own family and within two communities of faith I have served. Not all of them, but many of these deaths have been a part of the necessary suffering of life for me. They have revealed to me that my attempts to define life on the basis of my own little projects, my own little world view, my own need to define who is in and who is out are not simply insufficient; they are illusory. Death has taken me to reality. It is a crisis that has taken me to a bigger world, a less rigidly defined one, a less angry one, a gentler one, a more forgiving one, a more loving one, a more inclusive one. The folks who disagree with me can no longer be easily written off.

You know, it strikes me that while crisis or "necessary suffering" pushes us to deal with ourselves, in many ways what it does is much deeper than it. It takes us to the struggle not simply with ourselves, but with God. Genesis tells us that Jacob's struggling was actually a wrestling match with God.

After the night-long wrestling match, from which Jacob arises the victorious one, he tells his wrestling partner who has cried, "Let me go," "I won't let you go unless you bless me." Blessing. In many ways, this is God stuff. The winner of the match wants to be blessed. And the

wrestling partner says, “Now that I know your name, I will bless you. And I will give you a new name. You no longer will be named Jacob, the deceiver; you will be called Israel, the one who struggles with God.”

This wrestling match that involves Jacob and his struggle with himself is ultimately a wrestling match with God. This story is obviously not just about one person. It is about a whole nation—the whole nation of Israel. They are the people who struggle with God. We are the people who wrestle with God. Life is a wrestling match with God. And by the way, we do not survive that wrestling match without some injury. While we do not lose the battle, we limp for the entirety of our lives. The wrestling match with God will never be about certainty or perfect clarity. We, if we are faithful and honest, will always live with doubt, questions, scars, signs of our humanness, our frailty, our brokenness.

But note this. In the middle of the wrestling match, we will be blessed. And we will be given a new identity. We will emerge from the waters hearing a voice that says: “You are my beloved, my child; in you I take delight. You I bless.” The crisis will help us see that the wrestling match is ultimately with love. You have been working hard to avoid the crisis, you have been working hard to remain right, to maintain these God-awful boundaries of us and them, and in the process you have been avoiding love. It is love that is after you. It is love that wants to meet you in the crisis. It is love that wants you to get over yourself. It is love that wants you to understand what life is really about. It is love that invites you to struggle and struggle mightily. It is love that invites you to pray and pray mightily, to serve as a squeaky wheel until justice is done, until the left out are remembered, the widows are cared for, the Haitians are finally recipients of good news.

The wrestling match with God is ultimately a wrestling match with love. Jesus understood that. He loved the forgotten, the poor, the sinners. He even loved the tax collectors and the rich. He wrestled long and hard enough with God to know that life is ultimately about love. And the world, as it always does, failing to recognize love, even

when it was in its midst, pushing the world to crisis, tried to win the match with power. The world put love to death. And for a while we thought that the world was victorious. But contrary to the conclusion of the Jacob story, the humans, the strugglers, didn't emerge victorious. Death gave way to life. Injustice gave way to justice. Love was raised from the dead. Love won! And love is now on the throne.

The big-time wrestling match that life is a battle with love. You can fight it if you want. You can pretend that it is all about you, your opinions, your worldviews, your family, your little group, your country, if you want. But why not give into the crisis of love? Why not get over yourself and say: "Love, bless me. Give me a new name. Give me a new identity. Make me a struggler with love. Free me to live as your child."