

*Ninth Sunday after Pentecost*  
*August 2, 2020*

(Read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

*Surely the Presence of the Lord- refrain (UMH 328)*

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;  
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.  
I can hear the brush of angels' wings,  
I see glory on each face;  
surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

- Lanny Wolfe

Centering Words:

You have come from afar and waited long and are wearied. Let us sit side by side, sharing the same bread drawn from the same source to quiet the same hunger that makes us weak. Then standing together let us share the same spirit, the same thoughts that once again draw us together in friendship and unity and peace. (*The UMH Book of Worship, 455*)

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

Prayer of the Day:

Come to us, Holy One, even in our times of resistance. Work within and through us, even when we wrestle with doubt and despair. Enlighten and guide us even in our darkest hour. Bless us and call us by name, even when we reject your presence. Hold us and love us even when we try to run away. When we feel beat down by the world and are weary with fatigue and sorrow, nourish us with your mercy and your grace. Fill us with your love, that we may go forth with confidence and faith. In your mighty name we pray as Jesus taught us to pray: (*Abingdon Worship Annual, 2020, 167*)

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word  
O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Epistle Reading

Romans 9:1-5

Gospel Reading

Matthew 14:13-21

Special Music

Old Testament Reading      Genesis 32:22-31

Sermon      *Wrestling with God*

Hymn

*O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go (UMH, 480)*

1. O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in thine ocean depths  
its flow may richer, fuller be.

2. O Light that followest all my way,  
I yield my flickering torch to thee;  
my heart restores its borrowed ray,  
that in thy sunshine's blaze  
its day may brighter, fairer be.

3. O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow thru the rain,  
and feel the promise is not vain,  
that morn shall tearless be.

4. O Cross that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from thee;  
I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
and from the ground there blossoms  
red life that shall endless be.

Benediction:

Go forth knowing that you are part of God's family. Go forth proclaiming the praises of God. Go forth in the assurance that Christ is always with us. Go forth to bring the kingdom of God wherever you are. Amen. (*Abingdon Worship Annual 2020*, 165)

Response:

*God Be With You till We Meet Again (UMH 673)*

God be with you till we meet again;  
by his counsels guide, uphold you,  
with his sheep securely fold you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

Genesis 32:22-31

I must begin with a confession. The title of this sermon was stolen from John Culp. The reason and circumstances for my stealing this title will be revealed later in the sermon.

Jacob had fled from his brother Esau. He had gone to the land of his grandfather Abraham. There he married the daughters of Laban: Leah and Rachel. He fathered eleven sons from Leah, Rachel's maid Bilhah, Leah's maid Zilpah, and finally Rachel. Now he is returning to his homeland and will face his brother Esau.

He sends his wives, children and servants across the River Jabbok but he stays on the other side, alone. Suddenly a man appears and wrestles with Jacob, a struggle that lasts all night. Now it is not explicitly stated, but we may infer that the man was God or God's messenger. As dawn is breaking, the struggle appears to be ending in a draw when the man uses a rather underhanded tactic and strikes Jacob in the hip, knocking it out of joint. Then the man (God?) changes Jacob's name and blesses him.

This story seems a little odd in that God (if we assume that the man Jacob wrestled with was God) would bless a man who prevailed against him and did not readily submit to God's will. We know that God had already proclaimed that Jacob would be stronger than Esau and Esau would serve Jacob (Genesis 25: 23), so why would God bless someone who did not submit to God's will?

The point of this story may be that our faith and dedication to God becomes stronger as we wrestle with God. God may want us to wrestle with the call of God. We are to wrestle with God and that is OK.

I know there have been many times when I have wrestled with God. As many of you know, Kay and I came to Columbia for me to get my Masters in Social Work from USC. I had felt a calling from God at an early age, and during my teenage and college years discerned that my calling was to work with "the least of these". Thus, the degree in Social Work.

I had begun working with persistently mentally ill adults in Jacksonville and continued to work primarily with that population with the Department of Mental Health at Columbia Area Mental Health Center, Lexington Co. MHC and Bryan Psychiatric Hospital. I struggled with God, for I started out wanting to work with children but my path in mental health was always steered toward the persistently mentally ill. However, I truly felt that I was doing what God was calling me to do.

Then, as I was working as a Social Work Supervisor at Bryan, things began to change. The emphasis began to be on getting patients discharged as quickly as possible regardless of whether or not they had the resources, like stable housing, that would keep them out of the hospital and in the community. I really was in an ethical dilemma, to do what the system wanted me to do or to do what was in the best interest of the patient. Also, during this time, whenever I applied for a different position in the department or elsewhere, the door was shut. God was sending me hints that there was something else for me to do, but I resisted.

I began to feel uneasy and unfulfilled at DMH. It was not that I did not like working with the patients, I loved that. But I felt that the system was becoming more focused on budget and money and not on the people it was to serve. My values no longer fit the values of DMH. I began wrestling with God, feeling a call to do something else, something unknown, but did not want to leave the comfort of what I had known for 25 years.

I had begun team teaching the Sunday school class Kay and I attended at Mt Hebron. The more I taught the lessons, the more I discovered that I enjoyed reading and really studying the text. I sometimes went deeper than the lesson went into a text. I enjoyed studying the Bible and helping people to understand. Some people said I quit teaching and started preaching. I was beginning to get a pull to go into the ministry.

I wrestled hard with God. I was considering going to get a Ph.D in Social Work when Kay (according to the way I remember) said that she could not support me in getting a Ph.D but maybe going to Seminary. My mother outright told me, "John, maybe this means you are supposed to go into the ministry." I replied no, I was doing what God called me to do. Mom just shook her head.

Finally, one day I came home and told Kay, "I think God is calling me into the ministry."

She said, "About time you figured that one out."

I called John Culp, who was the pastor at Mt Hebron at the time, and told him I had something I needed to talk to him about. He set an appointment on Wednesday evening before the Wednesday night supper. I drove up to the church and noted the sermon title on the marquee for that Sunday: *Wrestling with God*. I went in and told John that I had been wrestling with God. John guided me as to what I needed to do to begin the process toward ordination, a process I hopefully will finish this year.

I began taking classes at Lutheran Seminary, but that did not end my wrestling with God. I continued to wrestle with God as Kay was diagnosed and began treatment for breast cancer. Instead of completely trusting God I took the position of director of Social Work at BPH when it was offered to me. I was thinking this would make up for lost income as Kay had to quit working. Within a year and a half, God, and the system, threw me to the ground said, "NO! It's time to give it up, social work that is, and focus on what I want you to do."

Did I stop wrestling with God? No. This journey has been a struggle, a wrestling match almost every day. But through my wrestling with God I have grown in my faith, in my knowledge of God and my relationship with God. I have changed. I am not the same person that walked through the doors of Trinity 34 years ago.

As Jacob wrestled with God he was changed. He changed from Yakov, *he takes by the heel or supplants*, to Israel, *the one who strives with God*. Jacob changed from being a trickster who tricked his brother out of his rightful inheritance and father's blessing, to one who through the nation promised to Abraham would descend.

As we wrestle with God, struggle with God, we change. When we wrestle with God, we discern completely what God is calling us to do. It may not be a call into ordained ministry, but it may be to discern a career change, or what to do after retirement. It may be to discern if the person you are in a relationship with is the one God has for you. It may be to discern basically who you are.

It may be to examine beliefs and attitudes that need to change. When I was at Shiloh, an eighty-year-old man said to me, "John I understand what you are saying about welcoming people of different races into the church but I have a hard time with that because I was raised believing that the races belonged separate." He was wrestling with God over that issue and I affirmed the importance of him wrestling with this.

Many may say that wrestling with God, questioning God is a sin and lack of faith. I disagree. Throughout the Bible we see some of the great heroes- Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, Jeremiah, Job- questioning and wrestling with God. John Wesley wrestled with God throughout his life, even as he neared the end of his life he supposedly claimed, "I am not a Christian."

Wrestling with God does not show a lack of faith or trust in God, if in fact it leads to a greater faith and trust in God. Jacob became Israel, *he who strives with God*, because he prevailed. He prevailed, not in that he defeated God in a wrestling match, but because he made it through the match. This wrestling match with God

was for Jacob a transformative process. By making it through the process, making it through the wrestling to daylight, he prevailed. He prevailed in that he wrestled with God and was changed. He was changed to the one who strove with God and therefore could strive with his brother and any other obstacles he might face.

We wrestle with God. We struggle to understand God's calling for each of us, today and tomorrow. I can attest that God may not have just one calling for us. So, wrestle with God. Question God. For in the questioning and wrestling you may come to know God more closely and understand your calling better at whatever stage in life you may be. Wrestle with God for God wrestles with us with love, a love that will not let us go.