

Jacob's name became Israel. The God-wrestler.

That being the case, the family of Israel truly is much larger than the nation bordering on the Mediterranean Sea! I don't think I know one person who hasn't wrestled with God.

Wrestling is an interesting sport. I know a little bit about wrestling because I was once engaged to a wrestler and later I married one. My dad was also a wrestling coach for a season or two at the middle school where he taught Physical Education and coached a myriad of other sports. I not only went to my boyfriend's wrestling meets, I also announced the meets at the middle school. This was while I was still in my I-want-to-work-in-sports-information phase.

Wrestling is intense. Two people are trying to pin each others' shoulders to the floor and using different types of holds to do so. The point is that the two wrestlers are wrapped around each other using practically every muscle in their bodies to either pin or keep from being pinned to the mat. The match ends if one person's shoulders meet the floor or if one outscores the other in takedowns or escapes when the bell sounds.

Unlike boxing, wrestling has no protective gear, other than a head guard. It's you and your opponent engaged in the least physical distancing, highest energy exertion contest ever. Body hair is your enemy.

Now, you might think that a wrestling match is something that is only between the two wrestlers. You would be correct. A wrestling meet on the other hand, is a series of matches ranging from the lightest weight category to the "heavyweight" category. Whichever team wins the most matches wins the meet. Therefore, when you are wrestling you are doing so for the team as well as for yourself.

When I imagine Jacob at Jabbock Creek, he's wrestling with far more than a strange angel. He's wrestling with shame for cheating his brother out of his birthright. He's wrestling with anger over Laban's outrageous substitution of Leah for Rachel. He's wrestling with his own faith. Why else would he ask for a blessing from the stranger? Did Jacob not receive the blessing from Isaac? Wasn't it good enough to take that from his brother? Does he think winning the match would take God's blessing from Esau as well? Oh, Jacob, you are a mess.

Like so many who need external confirmation for what already exists internally, Jacob ends up 'out of joint'. The God-wrestler goes to meet his estranged brother with a limp. To his amazement, Esau welcomes him joyfully. There was nothing to worry about. He spent the night locked up in his own angst over nothing.

Did he not think that God was watching over his brother? Was he so self-absorbed that the community of the sons of Isaac couldn't have been imagined? He may have been defeated in his solo match, but the goodness of God had won the meet.

The disciples wrestled with Jesus in much the same way. Never truly trusting him, they look out for themselves. They only had two fish and five loaves. That was barely enough to feed the twelve of them. If they were going to care for themselves and others who were in the Nazarene's entourage, they had to get somewhere to purchase more to eat, or to fish for the rest of what they needed. To do that, they needed the crowd to disperse.

But, Jesus, knew what the crowd needed. As any good rabbi would, he asked them to sit down while he did his teaching. Instead of fighting over what was available, Jesus blessed it. It was, miraculously, more than enough. We don't know how.

Some theorize that the prayer of blessing brought out the best of everyone and they began to share what they had. Others believe that the loaves multiplied, just as described. Some wonder what happened to the fish!

Whatever happened, it was an event to behold. All four gospels tell this story, so something significant went down on that beach. It is a story of abundance and generosity. Before the crowds knew they needed to be fed, they were fed. The loaves were no match for God's generosity. Jesus won the day because it wasn't about one or two, or even twelve people. It was about the community. It was about keeping people fed.

Today, like Jacob, we're wrestling with a lot of stuff. Some of it may threaten to pin our shoulders to the mat. One thing about all those wrestler-types I've known and loved – they worked really, really hard to build their muscles so that they could fight back against their opponents. Spiritual struggles require us to work out also. We cannot go up against a foe not having put in the time for prayer, scripture, and self-examination. If we do, we'll find ourselves flat on the mat.

Hard work ahead of time plus trust in the generosity of God combine to make us strong and help us persevere. As strong as we may train ourselves to be, we must remember that our wrestling is more than a solo match. We're a team and we have each others' backs, even if we lose a match or two. If we stay strong together, our blessings will be multiplied.

Amen.