

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – October 16, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Genesis 32:22-30 (NIV)

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23) After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24) **So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.** 25) When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26) Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27) The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28) Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." 29) Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. 30) So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Back when I was in high school, I decided that I'd join the wrestling team. I was 4' 11" and weighed 89 pounds. Amazingly, enough I actually had a chance to be part of the varsity squad – for a time! I still remember my varsity debut. I carefully put on my headgear, went to the center of the mat, shook hands with my opponent and 26 seconds later I was flat on my back and the match was over. I don't recall that I ever won a match but I do remember having the chance to travel to Oostburg for another match. I was determined to make the contest last longer than 26 seconds -- and I did. Unfortunately, I spent a lot of time on my back during that match too. I lost 15-1.

In the Old Testament lesson for today, we are told that Jacob was involved in a wrestling match with a vastly superior opponent. And amazingly Jacob won the victory! **Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25) When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26) Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27) The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28) Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."**

Perhaps we should back up just a moment to set the stage for this wrestling match. Jacob was Abraham's grandson – the son of Isaac. He had a twin brother named Esau. The Bible tells us that there was quite a rivalry between these brothers. Twenty years prior to the events, of our text Jacob had deceived his aging Father, Isaac and tricked him into giving him a blessing that belonged to Esau. Esau was so angry that he plotted revenge and Jacob had to flee for his life. He fled to Aram where he lived with his Uncle Laban.

Those years were filled with some interesting contrasts. On the one hand Laban didn't always treat Jacob fairly and honestly but on the other hand the Lord always made everything work out to Jacob's advantage. During this time, the Lord was teaching Jacob to rely on him and his promises. Finally, the time had come when the Lord instructed Jacob to return to his home in Canaan.

Jacob and his family and all of his possessions had arrived safely on the eastern shores of the Jordan River. But the situation between Jacob and his brother Esau remained unresolved. Jacob had sent messengers ahead to speak with Esau. They returned with the message the Esau was coming to meet Jacob with a band of 400 men. **In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. (8) He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape." (9) Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac,**

LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' (10) I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. (11) Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. (12) But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.' " (Genesis 32:7-12 NIV)

Jacob prayed for protection and then he prepared an impressive and lavish gift for his brother: **two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15) thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys** (Genesis 32:14-15 NIV) – sending them to his brother in one group after another.

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23) After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24) So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

Jacob spent the night physically wrestling with God himself! The contest ended when God touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint. Although he could no longer wrestle Jacob throw his arms around the man and demanded a blessing from him. Although the man refused to share his name with Jacob; among other blessings, he gave Jacob the blessing of a new name: **the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob (the deceiver), but Israel (which means struggles with God), because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."** Jacob clearly understood who the man was who wrestled with him that night -- **Jacob called the place Peniel (which means face of God), saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."**

Perhaps the primary lesson that we can learn from this account is that God is pleased to let his children wrestle passionately and intensely with him in prayer. In his amazing love, the almighty God came to Jacob and let him prevail. God allowed Jacob wrestle blessings away from God. That same God has graciously invited us to wrestle with him in prayer and promised us his blessings saying: **"Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."** (Psalm 50:15 NIV) So dear friends let's

Theme: Wrestle with God in Prayer with the understanding that

1. Prayer often grows from a desperate need
2. Prayer exhibits a confident faith
3. Prayer receives God's rich blessings

Prayer often grows from a desperate need. That certainly was the case with Jacob, wasn't it? Jacob had pretty well exhausted all of his creativity and cunning in this situation. Yet there were questions beyond his control. The Lord wrestled with Jacob to enable him to overcome his stubborn and sinful self-reliance. In spite of all that Jacob had done he was left wondering. Would God really keep his promise to give Jacob the land of Canaan and bless him with many descendants include one who would be the Savior of the world? Would Esau overpower him and kill him in revenge for his past deceitfulness? After all that he had done – Jacob still could only wonder about these questions. His situation was desperate. That's why Jacob wanted to spend the night alone in prayer.

As Jacob wrestled with God, for a time it seemed as if he was trying to prevail with his own strength. It's almost as if God was toying a bit with him. When God saw that Jacob would not relent, he simply touched his hip causing it to go out of joint. Exhausted and crippled, Jacob was in no shape to battle his brother Esau – the Lord had humbled him. All he could do was hold on the Lord and his promises.

Don't you and I also suffer from the "I can do it myself" syndrome at times? It's easy isn't it to spring into action at the first sign of trouble to try to figure out a solution. Maybe like Jacob, we've created a desperate situation because of our failures to trust in the Lord and for our sins of self-reliance. The Lord may allow us "to get in over our heads" to remind to trust in the Lord and not lean on our own understanding. (cf. Proverbs 3:5) He may wrestle with us by sending some difficulty into our lives to lead us to turn away from our own strength and to humbly "limp" to him and cling to him in prayer.

When we take the lesson to heart that prayer often grows from desperate needs – we may become more fervent in prayer. We may also become more frequent in prayer as we recognize that the Lord isn't just our refuge and strength in time of need but also the one who supplies our daily bread. We will see every situation in life as an opportunity to come to reach out to the Lord with a confident faith.

We had the opportunity to listen in on Jacob's prayer as we set the stage to discuss the events of this text. In his prayer, Jacob simply poured out his heart to the Lord his God as he called to mind the Lord's promises and past blessings. Those promises gave him the faith and the confidence to seek the Lord's help in the difficult situation that was at hand with his brother Esau. That faith was further demonstrated in the fact that after God put his hip out of joint. Instead of collapsing in defeat, Jacob clung to his opponent confidently insisting that he would not release him until he obtained a blessing.

Here's another lesson for us: Prayer exhibits a confident faith. Why is it that we are willing to go God in our times of desperate need and pour out our hearts to him in prayer? It's because of the promises he has made to us. Already at our baptisms, the Lord gave us a new name – his name. As Christians our faith has been bolstered by the Lord's promises to us – promises to shepherd us through the difficult days of life. The Lord's decrees that he knows the plans he has for us and that it is his intention to prosper us and not harm us; to bless us by giving us hope and a future. (cf. Jeremiah 29:11)

The one who offered his son as a sacrifice for our sins will not leave us or abandon us. And so in confident faith come – clinging to the cross of Christ. Because the Lord given us this invitation: **Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.** (Matthew 11:28 NIV) we have the confidence to lay our burdens on the Lord. **This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.** (1 John 4:14-15 NIV) That is why we wrestle with God in prayer with a confident faith.

There's one more lesson that we can take home from our lesson today. When we wrestle with God in prayer, our prayers will receive God's rich blessings. God came to Jacob and graciously allowed him to wrestle blessings from him. Among those blessings was the fact that the Lord led Jacob to understand that his real strength came from the Lord. God also blessed with a new name – "the one who struggles with God," – Israel. This new name was a reminder of the blessings that the Lord had graciously given to him. Forgiveness for his sins of self-reliance and deceptions was another one of the blessings Jacob received from the Lord. The Lord also blessed Israel with numerous descendants according to his promise. Those descendants included the Savior of the world who provides peace with God and eternal life to those who believe. And speaking of peace, Jacob was blessed with a peaceful reunion with Esau the next day.

Through faith in Christ Jesus, we have been granted the privilege of approaching God's throne of grace in prayer. We've been invited to be "Israelites" – people who wrestle with God in prayer. And like Jacob our prayers receive God's gracious blessings.

We have been blessed with the wonderful gift of forgiveness for Jesus' sake. God who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—will also, along with him, graciously give us all things. (cf. Romans 8:32). The Lord graciously answers our prayers for daily bread – supplying us with all that we need for our bodies and life. The Lord graciously answers our prayers that his will might be done by using his Word and Sacrament to strengthen our faith to live in keeping with his will. The Lord has delivered us from evil and enabled us to resist temptation in answer to our prayers. The Lord has blessed us with the promise of a home in heaven with him.

So dear children of the heaven Father, continue to approach God in prayer; boldly and confidently laying your concerns and fears before him. Pour out your heart and your soul to him as you wrestle with him fervently in prayer. You will be blessed! Amen.