

Wrestlemania

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
The Second Sunday of Stewardship Season
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
October 14, 2018
Text: Genesis 32:22-32

Perhaps it might surprise you to know that when I was a little girl, like around the age of 10 or so, I was quite the fan of professional wrestling on TV. For a brief time, I was enthralled by Studio Wrestling which aired in my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA every Saturday night at 8pm. I suspect my fandom developed because what I wanted to watch on television I wasn't allowed to watch. My parents had a list of prohibited shows including *The Twilight Zone* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* to name a couple. But, I think it was *Paladin* I was banned from when I stumbled across Studio Wrestling and was hooked, at least for a while.

Those were the early days of professional wrestling, before all the fancy costumes and staged grudge matches between hulking guys and gals. Studio Wrestling was in black and white so I guess there was no point to fancy costumes and garish make-up. Instead, there was hype galore and two big guys – or occasionally a really big guy matched up against an obviously smaller guy – who just went at it. The referee would walk around the ring, occasionally getting down on all fours and pounding on the mat for reasons I never quite grasped. After watching for a few weeks,

I knew some of the wrestlers by name and my favorite was Bruno Sammartino, the Italian Strongman who called Pittsburgh home. I can't tell you why I liked him, but I did. He just seemed like a decent, nice guy who happened to wrestle for a living. And, as I later learned, that's exactly who he was.

Bruno Sammartino was born in Italy just before World War II and while his father made it out of Italy to Pittsburgh before war broke out, Bruno, his mother and siblings did not. They spent the war hiding out in the mountains with his mother sneaking into Nazi occupied towns to get food when she could. Needless to say by the end of the war, Bruno and his surviving siblings (four died) along with his mother finally made it to join his father in Pittsburgh. The deprivations of war caused Bruno to be a sickly child, much weakened by all he had been through. He also could only speak Italian. Thus, he became a preferred target of the local bullies in his neighborhood. He soon figured out he needed to bulk up to protect himself so he took up weight-lifting and wrestling. The rest, as they say, is history. Bruno went on to enjoy an impressive career that spanned decades coming to be known as one of the most famous professional wrestlers ever. However, he declined the distinction of being inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame several times because he was so upset about the direction he saw professional wrestling moving in. He deplored the rampant drug use, especially of steroids, and he was

greatly distressed by the storylines of professional wrestling which he felt had become entirely too vulgar, diminishing the sport he had devoted his life to. He finally accepted the honor in 2013, just five years before he died, when he was assured that the drug use, at least, had been sufficiently addressed. Thus, Bruno Sammartino was a wrestler's wrestler. Perhaps that's why whenever I read the story of Jacob's wrestling match, I picture Bruno Sammartino in his glory against a divine opponent.

But, Jacob was no Bruno Sammartino. Not hardly. By the time of this story, Jacob had already lived a full life. He had two wives, two concubines and 11 children, not to mention huge flocks of all kinds of livestock. Jacob was also no angel, by a long shot. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. He was also the twin brother of Esau, who was the older twin by minutes. But, as the older son, this few minutes meant that Esau would inherit everything from his father once his father had bestowed a blessing upon him. Rebekah much preferred Jacob to his brother so she schemed with him to fool Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing instead of his brother Esau. Their plan worked but, as you might expect, when Esau discovered what had happened, he became enraged and threatened to kill Jacob when an opportunity presented itself. So Rebekah encouraged Jacob to run away to her relatives which he did. He married into Laban's family, twice through his two wives

Leah and Rachel, and managed to become quite wealthy as he managed the flocks for Laban. Eventually Jacob had a falling out with Laban again because of his shenanigans and decided to flee back home, taking his wives, concubines, children and flocks with him, even though they all really belonged to Laban. Through yet more deception, Jacob made peace with Laban and they continued their journey back to Canaan to the encounter with Esau.

This brings us to the point in Jacob's story which we read this morning – his wrestling match with some kind of divine being, or perhaps God himself. Important to know here is that Jacob had sent his wives, and concubines and children and flocks on ahead of him, leaving himself alone on one side of the river once the others had crossed. In fact, he had divided them up into different groupings and had them space themselves out from each other so that if Esau encountered them, and refused the gifts they brought for him, killing them instead, there would still be other groups between himself and Esau, giving him time to figure out what to do. Thus, it's readily apparent that Jacob was not, up to the point of his wrestling match, what an admirable person. In fact, quite the opposite was the case. Jacob was a cheat and a conniver, willing to take advantage of any situation and any person to put himself in the best position possible. And yet, he felt this compulsion to return home, to confront the brother he had cheated so long ago.

The wrestling match described in today's story is the only story like it in the Old Testament. It takes place the night before Jacob is to encounter Esau so he is understandably afraid of how this meeting with the brother he cheated would go. Many of the details of this story are provocative not the least of which is the fact that he sent his entire family and all his worldly goods ahead of him intentionally, letting them encounter Esau's feared wrath first. Even knowing this, we're left to wonder why he decided to stay alone on the other side of the river after the others had crossed. It seems likely that he did send them on ahead to try to convince Esau that he wasn't such a bad guy, but why stay behind, alone, on the other side of the river? That question is not so easy to answer, and, as you might imagine, theologians have pondered the reason and the resulting wrestling match for centuries.

One theory is that Jacob, by staying alone perhaps to contemplate his meeting with Esau the following day, angered the local river demon and that demon is who he wrestled with all night. This would explain why the creature was so insistent on leaving as the sun rose since a river demon could only come out at night. But, the river demon theory doesn't really hold up in the light of the conversation between Jacob and the being when Jacob insisted on receiving a blessing from the creature before he would release him. This little fact tells us that Jacob was, in fact, very strong. He was strong enough, though an older man by now, to

wrestle with some sort of supernatural being all night, holding his own throughout. The being finally defeats Jacob only by putting his hip out of joint, leaving him maimed but alive.

But who was this supernatural being? Was it God? Was it an angel of God? Is the whole story a metaphor of Jacob wrestling with his conscience all night as he contemplated facing the brother he had cheated so egregiously the following day? The truth is, no one really knows. But, what we do know from the story is that Jacob emerges from this prolonged wrestling match in the dark of night as a changed man. He began the night as a fearful, remorse filled man who must encounter face to face the reality of his prior bad acts. He is not yet penitent, ready to acknowledge what he had done as sinful. But as the night wears on and he wrestles with the divine being, demanding first to know who the being is and then a blessing, he literally becomes a changed man. The being, instead of revealing his own identity, gives Jacob a blessing and a new name – Israel. So, as the dawn breaks the horizon and the struggle ends, Jacob realizes that whomever he has been wrestling with, the wrestling itself has given him a new relationship with God because the new name given him meant one who has striven with God. Jacob then renames the place where the match took place Peniel which means, “I have seen God face to face and survived.”

Jacob's wrestling match is a remarkable story with considerable resonances in anyone's life. Who has not experienced one of those dark nights of the soul when you've tossed and turned, consumed with worry or remorse or any one of a thousand doubts about life, about yourself, about God and why things are as they are? Jacob's wrestling through the night with an unknown assailant touches us deeply because we've all been there. Not literally going two out of three falls with a divine being we can't see, of course. But some would argue that Jacob wasn't really wrestling with anyone either. Instead Jacob was wrestling with his own conscience, his own desire to be someone other than who he knew himself to be. Jacob's wrestling match, whether real or imagined, is a universal story about what it means to come to a final reckoning on something one has been trying to avoid all of one's life. It's a story about having to face all of one's shortcomings, all of one's failed dreams and desires, all of one's moments of selfishness and self-preservation at the expense of others.

Dear friends, the simple truth is we are all Jacob at many points in our lives. We all have those moments when we are afraid to face the future and find ourselves struggling with how to move forward in the face of challenges and difficulties we had not anticipated and hoped to avoid. We all have those moments when we are confronted head on by who we really are instead of who we

imagined ourselves to be. We all have those nights when we toss and turn, wondering if the dawn of a new day will ever come chasing away the demons of fear and worry so real in the night. That's why Jacob's story is truly each of our stories. It explains so simply and clearly where God is in relation to us through all those long nights and anxious days.

Dear friends, God is right there in the thick of it with us. God is there, holding us back when we want to run headlong into the anger and bitterness that can consume us when life is brutally unfair. God is there, revealing our strength when we can't imagine how we can endure another day. God is there, holding us close and whispering a blessing in our ears. Your name, God whispers, is precious to me, just like you are. God reminds us, I have called you by name, you are mine. Dear friends, Jacob's story is our story. In the midst of the darkest day or the longest night when you feel like the only person in the world, Jacob reminds us that God's blessing is still real and life changing, if only we will allow it to be. Jacob reminds us that God is right there with us, chasing away demons and revealing new possibilities no matter what life throws at us. Jacob's truth is our truth – every day is a new beginning fresh from God. May our hearts be open to receive each day's blessings as God reveals our way forward. Amen.