

Do you know what the world's oldest sport is? Sorry, Vikings fans, I'm afraid it's not football. It's not basketball either, or even soccer. The world's oldest sport is... baseball! Oh, yes! In fact, it's talked about in Genesis chapter 1, the very first book of the Bible. Remember how the Bible begins? "In the 'big inning' God created the heavens and the earth..." Okay, that's not exactly how it goes. So, yes, as much as I like baseball, it hasn't exactly been around that long. It really isn't the world's oldest sport. But there is a sport that really has been around a long time, and it really is talked about in the Bible. In fact, it's a central part of our Old Testament reading today- it's wrestling. Jacob wrestles with God. As we'll see this morning, God's Word compares praying to wrestling.

Have you ever wrestled with God over a situation that just seemed impossible? Maybe there was someone who was once close to you and then you had a falling out. Their heart has become cold toward you. Or, maybe there was a health problem with a family member for which there seemed to be no cure. When you prayed about those situations, how **hard** and how **long** did you pray about it? Did you keep on persistently asking God like that lady did to the judge in our Gospel reading, or was your attitude about prayer more like, "Oh well, I've tried doing everything else. I might as well give prayer a shot, so here goes nothing"?

The more impossible a situation may seem, the more we can be tempted to pray without hope that it's actually going to do any good, especially if that problem has already been dragging on for a long, long time, like 20 years. I used **that** number because that's how long Jacob had been dealing with **his** problem. But, on this particular night in our text, Jacob's problem had become absolutely critical, and so he prayed harder than he had ever prayed before in his entire life.

This morning God invites us to do the same. If praying is like wrestling with God, let's take all those "impossible" situations we're dealing with at home, work or school, or wherever, and let's step into the ring with God. Here we'll see that: 1. God **wants** us to wrestle with Him. 2. He does this as our Friend not as our adversary, because He shows us the way to win.

We read in our text how one night Jacob got up and took his family and all of his possessions and set out to meet his brother Esau, whom he had not seen or heard from in twenty years. All those years earlier, Jacob's father, Isaac, had wanted to give the blessing of the first born to Jacob's older twin brother, Esau. This meant that Esau would have received twice as much of the inheritance as Jacob, and it also would have meant that Esau would be an ancestor of the promised Savior.

Esau had wanted the blessing of the first born for the money. Jacob wanted it, so that he could be an ancestor of the Savior. So, when Isaac was about to give the blessing to Esau, even though God had told him to give it to Jacob, Jacob pretended to *be* Esau, and so Isaac gave the blessing to him instead of his brother. When Esau found out, he became so angry that he promised to kill Jacob as soon as their parents had passed away. Jacob then fled the country with nothing but the clothes on his back. During the next 20 years, he worked hard, got married and had 12 children. He also became extremely wealthy. Well, it finally came time for Jacob and his family to return to the Promised Land, because that's where the promised Savior was to be born, after all. But, Jacob faced a big uncertainty. Would his brother, Esau, still want to kill him as he had once threatened to do? That seemed like a real possibility.

So, Jacob had sent word to Esau that he was coming home, and Esau headed out to meet him... with 400 soldiers! If this was going to be a happy reunion, why would Esau come with a small army?! Still, God had commanded Jacob to go back, so here's what he did. Jacob sent Esau 220 goats, 200 sheep, 30 camels, 50 head of cattle, and 30 donkeys. He sent these gifts in waves to soften up Esau and to keep some of his 400 soldiers busy. Jacob also divided his family into two groups so that if Esau attacked and killed one group, perhaps the other could get away.

We read in our text, "So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak." The fact that Esau wanted to kill Jacob was certainly wrong. But Jacob's not trusting God to somehow give him the blessing of the first born and then deceiving his father to get it was also wrong. In fact, one of Jacob's biggest weaknesses was not trusting God and acting like it was up to himself to take care of everything in his life.

Now, how are **you** at trusting God? How are you at putting everything into His hands? I have to confess I'm not always the best at that. My intentions, like Jacob's, might be for the best, but, when something good isn't happening, how tempting it is to try to force the issue? For example, suppose someone you know is weak in his worship life or weak in obeying one or more of God's commandments. What God wants us to do then is patiently, firmly, gently, lovingly speak the Word, so that the Holy Spirit may first convict and then heal his heart. But what if nothing seems to be changing? That's when Christians can be tempted to coerce, pressure, or even shame people into doing the right things. But is that how God brought us to faith? Is it how He makes our faith stronger and lead us in the paths of righteousness? No, and that's not how He worked with Jacob either. God let Jacob make a mess out of his life, and yet God kept blessing Jacob. And then God brought Jacob to the point where he realized he couldn't micromanage his life anymore. All he could do was pray... like his life depended on it, which actually... it did.

That's how it goes for us, too. God **wants** us to use all the gifts He's given us to do what needs to get done. He wants us to work to the best of our ability. **And** He wants us to keep training in His Word, and then live and use His Word in our daily life, as though people's souls and lives depend on it, because... they do. But, at the same time God wants us to **depend on Him** that He is working through us, even when we can't see that. Unfortunately depending on Him is not something our prideful, sinful heart likes to do. And so at times, God seems to withhold blessings that would be good for us or even good for His Kingdom, and then He invites us to wrestle Him (in prayer) for those blessings.

Later on in our text it says, "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. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." It seems strange that God appears as a man and as a man who couldn't defeat old Jacob in a wrestling match. Now, of course God was still almighty. With just a touch He put Jacob's hip out of joint. Yet even though Jacob couldn't walk anymore without help, he still wouldn't let go

of God's feet. That's pretty gutsy, isn't it? But that's how God **wants** His children to be. He wants us to wrestle with Him. He wants us truly to win. I said, **truly** win, because when we win against God in prayer, it's not a matter of Him just letting us win. We truly win. Here's how that's possible:

20 years earlier God had promised Jacob that He would be an ancestor of the Savior and that He would bring Jacob safely back to the Promised Land. On this frightful night, it didn't look like God was keeping that promise. Esau was coming out to Jacob ...with 400 soldiers! So, what Jacob did was **he held God to His promise**. We can do the same!

Here's one way that might look: God promised in our Baptism and re-affirms in the Lord's Supper that He will remember our sins no more. But, what if for years and years we have been struggling with the guilt or living with the consequences of our sins, or we don't feel like we are truly forgiven. Through Word and Sacrament, we can latch onto God's promise of forgiveness and not let go. Picture this scene: We're standing before God's judgment throne. He knocks us down to our face by reminding us of our sins and what we deserve. But then like Jacob we can grab hold of judge's feet and shout to Him, "But you promised..." Gutsy? Yes! Yet this is what God wants us to do, and this how we can truly win against His anger at our sins. Of course it's **only** because of Jesus' sin-atoning work on the cross that this can work.

Now since we can "defeat" God on this greatest issue, we can also defeat Him on lesser issues. But, there is this difference: When it comes to forgiveness, for Jesus' sake we can insist on exactly that – forgiveness. With other issues, we can simply commit ourselves into His hands and demand that He work out all the details into a blessing. We can be that bold because of God's own promises like this from Romans 8, "For we know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." Or like these from Matthew 7, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." God invites us to wrestle with Him in prayer. And He promises to give us the victory! To give us what He knows we need.

Back to our text, “The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered. 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.” God actually answered Jacob’s prayer in two ways. First God softened Esau’s heart, so that the next day when they met, it was a **happy** reunion. And while they never became best friends, a few years later they were able to bury their father, Isaac, together in peace. However, the greater blessing this night was Jacob’s name change. Jacob means heel grabber or deceiver. Israel means winner with God. Every time Israel would hear his new name, he would remember how he had wrestled with God and won. And so, the limp which he had for the rest of his life helped to keep him humble. But his name gave him **confidence** that God would always hear and answer his prayers.

You and I have also been given a new name. Our old name was “sinner”. Our new name is “child of God”.

Are you today facing some “impossible” situation? Have you been facing this impossible situation for a long time? Then it’s time to wrestle with God. He lets things get this bad, so that we’ll learn that we can’t rely on ourselves; we can only rely on Him. Then through His Word, God teaches us the wrestling holds that even He can’t get out of. Use these holds. Insist that God let nothing come between Him and you, except His love for you. Then be confident that somehow God will make that situation you’re facing work together for greater blessings of body and soul, then you’d ever imagine. God will do this, because through the merits and the love of Jesus, God has made us prayer champions over Him! Amen.