
Rugby, Wrestling, and A Blessing Too

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 24, Year C

We've all got stories about wrestling, we've got stories about darkness, we've got stories about fear, we've got stories about rivers, and we've got stories about blessing. In today's reading from the thirty second chapter in the first book of our shared story, we've got all of that. It may be that the story from Genesis that we hear this morning is among the most relatable in all of scripture, and if you disagree, you either didn't listen, or you're telling your own kind of story.

My freshman year of college, I was struggling to find my way. Who were my people? Where was my place? What was my purpose? It seemed like everyone knew on the very first day of school who they were and where they fit in. Not me.

Somewhere along the line, I found out about a group that interested me. I wasn't sure if I belonged there, but something drew me in. And so, all 97 pounds of me, standing tall at 5'4", went out for the women's rugby team. I had a couple of weeks to learn a difficult game before our first match, they call the games matches, by the way. Sewanee vs. Middle Tennessee State University, you know a big state school, the kind that's good at sports. As the game began, so did the snow begin to fall. But they didn't reschedule, the whistle blew, and the first kick flew through the air.

This was the first time that I can remember questioning the effectiveness of prayer because I had prayed without ceasing that I wouldn't ever touch a rugby ball, and pretty quickly, through the snow, the ball came hurtling from the scrum half to the fly half, to the center, to me, the lowly winger.

I caught it and took off running as fast as those twig legs could go, not realizing that there was a something of a brick wall on the field, named Shelby. I ran right into her. She wrapped her arms around me, picked me up and threw me onto the ground. I lay there seeing stars, wondering what in God's name I was doing there, in the snow, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, playing rugby. When I came to, I realized that play had not stopped, the tackle was of no concern to Shelby and that everyone was down the field, no one worried about me. So, I got up, and we played on. 90 minutes those matches last. I think I wrestled with Shelby and her teammates I think about 2,000 more times. When we got in the car after the game, the heat warmed my body enough for feeling to return and I realized, looking down at my arm that it was, in fact, broken. It was hard to say when that happened.

When we got back up the mountain, I sat in the doctor's office wondering if I should quit. I should have quit. Absolutely, I should have quit if the only part of the game was the rugby, but something about that game drew me in.

I wrestled and broke so many other times over the four years, but I could always come back to that pitch, to those people, to that game, and find some solid ground. Rugby blessed me with discipline, with some leadership and communication skills, with failure. It blessed me with some idea about what to do with a very real sense of smallness in a world where everything felt so much bigger and stronger than me.

I never got good at rugby, but rugby got me pretty good.

When we meet Jacob in this riverside wrestling match this morning, we would do well to remember where he's been. He was the grandson of Abraham, the second twin to Isaac and Rebekah. He was born grabbing his brother Esau's heel trying to alter the birth order on the way out after nine months wrestling in the womb. Later

on, he tricked that twin of his into selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. And with his mother's help, she liked him best, he stole the blessing from his father intended for his brother.

Jacob had made mistakes, he's been a different kind of guy, he struggled to find his way. He wasn't strong and good at hunting like his brother, he wasn't hairy and manly, he was his own, much to his father's chagrin. His faith was maybe part of him, but by this point, aside from that dream with the ladder, he hadn't really met God the way some of those other Old Testament guys had, so he had no reason to believe that he would meet God on the riverbank that night.

He was on his way to his brother, scared of what he would meet; remember that Esau was angry and armed with 400 of his angry friends. Jacob stopped for the night with his people, his family, his small army. He sent them away across the river and there he was all alone. Alone with the choices he'd made, the fear of anticipation, the uncertainty of his future, and we hear that he wrestled a man all night long. What man? Why? Where did he come from? We don't know any more than Jacob does. All we know is that through dark of the night until daybreak, Jacob wrestled someone. He wrestled hard enough to dislocate his hip, but he didn't quit.

As the sun rose, the man asked Jacob to let him go, but Jacob said no. Not until he got what he wanted, what he needed, a blessing. Still, he didn't know who this figure was, but for some reason he knew it was someone or something that could and maybe even would bless him. And so, after the wrestling, writhing in pain, he got the assurance that it was God, God says, "you have striven with God and with human, you have prevailed" and God blessed him.

This is a wrestling story, sure. But it's also a blessing story. The wrestling stops and the blessing prevails.

Wrong, beaten, broke down, lost, uncertain, scared, to be alive is to know what wrestling is. Each of us know what it is to grapple with the stuff and the figures we know and those we can't even name. We know what it's like to meet our match in the isolation of darkness and the darkness of isolation. We know what it's like to want to quit, to be sure we should. And if wrestling stories were all we had, no one would blame us for quitting. But the wrestling stories aren't the only ones. It's in the wrestling stories that we might dare to ask for blessing. Perhaps the story changes.

Jacob walked away from that tussle with a limp and a blessing. His life hadn't been perfect, and the rest of his life won't be perfect either. He didn't actually repent for anything that we know of during that match. He didn't suddenly become some glowing beacon of holiness. He was still a guy, an important guy, but a guy. With a limp, some stories, and a blessing.

Jacob wrestled with God. He wrestled hard. He didn't get punished, he didn't get damned, he didn't get cursed, he didn't lose everything. No, none of that. God could withstand the match. Maybe God even started it. But Jacob didn't scare his God away. He wrestled back and he got a blessing. And a limp.

Our walk through life being who we were created to be is never perfect. Our riverside, mountainside, roadside, bedside, tableside meetings with God are rarely perfect. And that is really no big deal to God. Not for lack of care, but for God's mere acceptance that wrestling is part of relationship. And so is blessing.

We live and bear the aches of broken arms, and we walk with limps that tell our stories. What we can't always see, or perhaps forget to remember, are the blessings that we bear as well. Those we dare to ask for, and those that fall upon us dark and beaten down as we may be.

Tell the wrestling stories. Tell the blessing stories. Tell all the blessing stories as you limp along.