

Genesis 32:22-31 ~ Luke 18:1-8

Core Strength

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Introduction

High School wrestling has always been a great sport for boys of all sizes. The sport is carefully calibrated, matching opponents who are in the same weight class. If you are very small or very large, it doesn't matter because there is a weight class for everyone. Wrestling is intense, it's one-on-one, but unlike other individual sports, you don't even have a tennis racket or a golf club, it's just you and your body, barely clothed in a skimpy singlet; and your opponent facing off in the center of the mat. Wrestling takes a special kind of courage, I think. My husband, Bob wrestled in high school and college and then coached a wrestling team he started at a Catholic high school where he taught English. So, as his wife, I have clocked in a fair number of hours watching this wonderful and unique sport.

Today we are spectators on the bleachers, just outside the mat of not one, but two wrestling stories, found in Genesis and Luke. The first you already heard, the ancient story, from the first book of the first Testament when Jacob wrestled all night as it turns out, with God. And we are told that Jacob prevailed. Now that's remarkable, given how uneven the match was. I'm pretty sure at weigh in, God and Jacob were not quite in the same weight class. In our second wrestling story from the Gospel of Luke, we have another uneven matchup: It's between a judge and a widow. This story comes to us as a parable that Jesus told his disciples. In Jesus' made-up wrestling story, it appears that the judge has all the power, and the widow has none. Let's see what happens, keeping in mind that this cartoonish story of Jesus' was intended to show his twelve disciples as they were on the road to Jerusalem; and now to show us, what faith really looks like. Let's see what we see, as they walk on the mat, and the match begins at Luke 18, verse 1.

Sermon

I hope you brought a towel and a pair of sweat bands with you today. Didn't you see the sermon title is, "Core Strength?" You may have thought you were coming to the kind of church where we sit quietly in the pew and listen to the sermon and subtly check our phones when we get bored. You would be right, except that this is core strength training day, and I'm your coach. So, everybody, when you hear my whistle: drop and give me fifty sit ups. Now you are looking nervous... Lucky for you, I forgot my whistle. And you can relax, because our scripture lessons are teaching us about *spiritual* core strength, rather than physical. But if you think about it, developing these two kinds of core strength, physical and spiritual, are not all that different: They are both hard and we often don't feel like doing them.

Here's the point right up front: Whether it's an all-night match like Jacob's, or it's day after day after day like the widow's, being faithful involves struggle and persistence, against seemingly unsurmountable, disproportionate odds. Luke chooses to interpret Jesus' intent by introducing this parable being, (18:1) "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

That is part of it, but there is so much more. Jesus sketches the judge in caricature as the very opposite of what a judge should be (and certainly not representing God). He sketches a cartoon of a pestering, persistent, won't take "no"-for-an-answer, widow, who is obviously punching way above her weight (yes, I realize I'm throwing in a boxing metaphor) and she wins, ultimately. It's kind of funny if you try to picture it.

Yes, it's about the need to keep praying against all odds. But I hear Jesus telling us more. In his composite sketch, Prayer is only one part of what faith looks like. The other part is action. Prayer must lead us to act differently, act courageously, act persistently against all odds to bring God's kingdom, God's mercy, and God's justice, on earth as it is in heaven. If prayer does not lead to this kind of action, it is not the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about. The reverse is also true: action that is not grounded in prayer will lack the purpose and focus that sustains the long battle, the long struggle against injustice, against hate against God's way of mercy and compassion, especially for the "least of these."

So how do we develop our spiritual "core strength" where prayer leads to action and action leads us to prayer? Let's jump back to the Jacob story for clues. Jacob did not know it was God at first. Throughout the night we are told he wrestled with "a man." I love the way the identity of his wrestling partner slowly dawns on him, perhaps by the first morning light. It rings true to my experience of the way God works in our lives. We toss and we turn; we may gripe and growl. We get out of sync with ourselves and just want it to be over. The clock is still running, and we wonder how long. Whomever or Whatever we may be wrestling with, it doesn't seem like God at all. Until it does. Sometimes it takes years. Lucky for Jacob, it was only one night.

However long or short it takes, Deep encounters with God do not leave us unchanged. Jacob came out with a limp. Jacob, now named "Israel" who was to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, did so with a bum hip. Perhaps to remind him of his "Peniel Moment." The night he wrestled his way to God's call to action and to a blessing. If you think back for a moment over your life, I'm sure you have had some "Peniel moments" as well. As a country and as a world we have shared the "Peniel moment" of the COVID pandemic. It was and for some still is a wrestling match. It leaves none of us the same. We all limp in different places of our bodies. We feel pain, grief, uncertainty about the future differently. When we stop trying to hide our limp, or fake our way emotionally, God will reveal our core strength that we never knew before. And God will leverage our limp into the superpower we have yet to discover. Through prayer that leads to action that leads to prayer, and so forth.

This holds true as individuals, like Jacob and the Widow. But also as countries and nations. Ukraine's resistance to Putin's punishing war is a striking example. In George Packer's *Atlantic* magazine piece, "On Democracy's Front Lines," he quoted Ukrainians who give us a window into their resolve, their core strength. Packer wrote, "I asked if they expected to win. 'We don't even think about anything else,' the graphic designer said. 'We need victory. Not-victory is not even in the mind. We have no choice.' Didn't they feel angry and tired? 'We are angry, and we are tired.'" Olyesa, a doctor in internal medicine, said "Sometimes it feels like too

much. We will cry a bit later, after we win the war." ...Lviv, a lovely Habsburg town, had been turned into a refugee center and logistics hub... It was all a little helter-skelter—no central department masterminded orders, inventory or distribution. An ancient Greek Catholic church stored flak vests in a room off the entryway and boxes of boots in a loft next to the defunct organ. Father Andrew, the youthful priest sometimes changed out of his black cassock into street clothes and drove military materiel some 700 miles across Ukraine, to the front..."

When I read this, I wondered if I was a Ukrainian pastor, could I, would I do this? They are doing it. As George Packer reflected, "A whole society mobilized: this was my first and most lasting impression. Nearly everyone I met had looked for something to do as soon as Russia attacked—some way to be useful without waiting for instructions from a higher authority... People are connected with each other in a way we normally aren't and connected to people we would never be connected to.. They are standing as an example for people around the world who refuse to accept a future of brutality and lies.ⁱ

Are we too soft in the middle, spiritually? On my way to this sermon, these haunting lines from Paul Simon's 1986 song, "You Can Call Me Al," came to mind: *A man walks down the street, He says, "Why am I soft in the middle, now? Why am I soft in the middle?The rest of my life is so hard. I need a photo-opportunity, I want a shot at redemption, Don't want to end up a cartoon, In a cartoon graveyard."* Do you want a shot at redemption? Do you hope for our community and our nation to have a shot at redemption? Friends, I think you do! Jesus gave us more than a shot at it. He showed us the path. And he walked it himself. Three steps forward and two steps back. All the way to the struggle and agony of the cross. All the way to hell and back. Different than he was before. Death and resurrection left Jesus with more than a limp, like Jacob. A common thread in all of the post-resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ, is how even his best friends did not recognize him. Until they did. It took a while for Cleopas and his friend: seven miles of walking together, then sitting down at table and breaking bread (Luke 24:31). For Mary Magdalene (John 20:16) she thought he was the gardener until she heard him call her name, "Mary."

What will it take for you and for me? What will it take for us as we struggle to redeem our increasingly dysfunctional democracy? What will it take for us to take action to redeem our ecosystem from the brink of disaster? Spiritual Core strength. We don't develop it from a single conversion experience. That is the starting gate. That is an invitation to the struggle that is the life of faith. The blow of the whistle to begin the match. Not the end.

Being found is the beginning. A beginning worthy of celebrating lavishly, as we heard in the first three lost and found stories back in Luke 15: the found sheep, coin, and son. As Dan Crump pointed out in his sermon last Sunday on the story of the ten men with leprosy who were all made clean by Jesus, but only one of the ten was "found to return" to give praise to God. He lifted up this odd turn of phrase, and here it turns up again, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth." Could this be the capstone of his lost and found stories? Jesus as the shepherd searching, the woman searching, the father searching, the healer searching for his people made well. And in the end: Jesus relentlessly searching to find faith on

earth. Jesus teaching us that the border between being lost and found is where our spirit core does its sit-ups and pushups.

Guatemalan Poet, Julia Esquivel, wrote a poem when state terrorism was unleashed against her people in the early 1980's in the most brutal way imaginable. Not unlike what we are witnessing in Putin's war against Ukraine. Not unlike our new friends we are helping to resettle, who fled for their lives from their home in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, back in 1996, to a refugee camp in Tanzania where they have been living until a week ago when they came to make a new home in Marshfield. This poem she wrote, titled, "The Chosen" sketches for us a vivid picture of what faith looks like: prayer that leads to action that leads to prayer in the name of God's justice, God's kingdom:

*I will remain with my people
 The dispossessed
 The deceived
 The persecuted
 The bargained-for.
 With the people who have never been considered
 Human but who keep standing up
 And surviving
 And beginning again...
 I will remain with the ones
 Who have been three times dispossessed,
 Forced off their land.
 The ones who have been chased like deer
 Through forests and jungles.
 I will remain with the silent people...
 Who guard in the intimacy of their hearts
 The last word.
 I remain with the elderly,
 With the widows
 And the orphans.
 In the crushed hearts
 Of the weak
 God finds Strength
 Yes, I will remain with my people.*

Whatever cross of grief or pain may be weighing on your heart, churning in your gut, pounding in your head right now: Whether it is over a personal loss, or the brokenness of our world, friends: we have a God who remains faithful. A God who is with us through the night. No matter how long or how dark. A God who is calling us to remain faithful, knowing with God we will ultimately prevail. And be granted a blessing.

ⁱGeorge Packer, "On Democracy's Font Lines," (*Atlantic*, October 2022), pp. 24-36.