

Sunday, August 2, 2026

Sermon: "And the Winner Is ..."

Genesis 32:22-31 NRSV

Where we are going in today's message: The real victory is in striving to overcome our daily struggles.

Muhammad Ali was larger than life, both inside and outside the boxing ring. He competed in some of the most memorable matches in boxing history, beginning with a world heavyweight upset over Sonny Liston in 1964.

Ali was famous for fighting with his mouth as well as his fists. Referring to Liston, he said, "He's too ugly to be the world champ. The world champ should be pretty like me!" He mocked Joe Frazier as ignorant and called him "the Gorilla." Known for treating his opponents with contempt, Ali once said, "I'm so mean, I make medicine sick."

Ali believed in himself, saying that "it's not bragging if you can back it up." But sometimes his arrogance backfired. When he was on a plane preparing for takeoff, the flight attendant came by and told him to buckle up. Ali replied, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The flight attendant replied, "Superman don't need no airplane, either. Buckle up!"

In 1971, Ali fought the "Fight of the Century" against Joe Frazier. In 1974, he competed against George Foreman in the "Rumble in the Jungle." In 1975, he fought Frazier again in the "Thrilla in Manila." That boxing match, held a half-century ago, is often called the "Greatest Fight of All Time."

The two were meeting in a Philippine coliseum for the biggest heavyweight contest in history. "The match was the first ever broadcast live overseas by satellite, and hundreds of millions of people watched from abroad," writes Newkirk in *The Atlantic*. "It would be a showcase for all of the beauty and ugliness of boxing ... a mirror to society and the soul. Ali and Frazier faced each other as the bell rang. And so began the Thrilla in Manila."

While the Ali-Frazier heavyweight fight was thrilling, so was the wrestling match between Jacob and a mysterious man in the book of Genesis. The leadup to this match is a story of estrangement

between Jacob and his brother Esau. After Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright, he fled from Canaan and lived in the service of Laban, his uncle, in northern Mesopotamia. There, he acquired wealth and two wives, Leah and Rachel, as well as a number of children.

But Jacob's relations with Laban soured when he prospered at his uncle's expense. Being forced to flee again, he returned to Canaan, and while heading home, he learned that Esau was advancing toward him with a large force. Fearing the worst, Jacob divided his servants and family members, hoping that if part was destroyed by Esau's front line, the other part might survive.

As evening fell, Jacob took his two wives, two maids and 11 children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok River. He sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions. Jacob ended up by himself, like a boxer in the corner of a ring.

Genesis tells us that "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (32:24). The bell rang, and Jacob began to fight the mysterious man — a divine being sometimes understood to be an angel, sometimes thought to be God himself.

Like the Thrilla in Manila, the fight went for a number of brutal rounds. Imagine the scene: Jacob won the first two rounds, but then the mystery man began to assert himself. During the fifth round, the timing and rhythm of the man improved. At the close of a very trying ninth round, Jacob felt like he was close to death.

The turning point came very late, midway through the 13th round, when Jacob sent the man flying backwards. In the 14th round, he dredged up his last reserves of power to make sure there would not have to be a 15th round.

"When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him" (v. 25). The Bible does not indicate whether this was a "low blow," an illegal punch below the waist, or simply a shot of sufficient force to end the contest. The mystery man struck him because he was desperate to free himself from Jacob's grasp.

The man cried out, "Let me go, for the day is breaking" (v. 26). But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (v. 26).

Jacob held tight, refusing to release the man until he received a blessing. The man gave in and said to him, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed" (v. 28). Jacob's new name can be translated, "The one who strives with God," a name that certainly describes Jacob well. Later, it would be attached to all his descendants, the people of Israel. The name may also mean "God strives." In either case, the root meaning of the word is "striving."

Jacob's wrestling match is truly the "Greatest Fight of All Time" because it teaches us about the importance of striving. Although he was feeling close to death in the 14th round, Jacob did not give up, he gave it everything he had. Because of his willingness to keep striving, Jacob received a blessing and a new name.

The same is true for us. Marriage can be a struggle, but it is a relationship that rewards striving. To remain faithful and committed for 10, 20 or 50 years is hard work, and there are many people who give up as soon as they hit a rough patch or find themselves in a difficult position. But there is a certain closeness and intimacy achieved only after decades of wrestling with all of the challenges of life together. Couples will never know that deep bond unless both partners make the effort to fight through the darkness together.

Finding your life's work can be a struggle, and it can take years of trial and error. So many young people today want to graduate and step immediately into an exciting and lucrative job, when the reality is that most of us must work for years to find our true calling.

Parenting can be a wrestling match as well, with the same sleepless nights that Jacob endured by the Jabbok. Unfortunately, there are people who disengage as soon as the going gets tough. They don't keep wrestling through times of pain, uncertainty and confusion, as Jacob did. Parents don't have to be perfect these days, but they do need to remain engaged, instead of escaping into work or hobbies. The message of Scripture is that it is important to keep striving, until the morning dawns.

Our model in all this is Jacob, a man who had many flaws and failings, but had the determination to stay engaged, even through a time of pain. An even better role model is Jesus, the One who refused

to surrender in the face of suffering and death, and who gave his life to save us from our sins. He could have walked away from the cross at numerous points in his life, but he refused to do it. He remained engaged and gave his body and his blood, so that we could experience forgiveness and new life.

We remember this sacrifice in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In this meal, we receive the bread that is his body, broken for us, and the cup that is his blood, shed for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus did not play it safe when he was faced with the cross. Instead, he stayed in the fight, and the result was a great blessing for each of us. He knew that the path to achieving God's will included struggle, and he did not avoid it.

Whenever we receive the Lord's Supper, we should remember the striving of Jesus and Jacob. Recall that when Jacob finished his struggle by the Jabbok River, he named the place Peniel, a word that means "the face of God." It is in that place that he saw God "face to face" (v. 30). The Lord's Supper is our Peniel as well. It is where we see God face to face, and where we receive the gift of Christ's body and blood.

At Peniel, Jacob wrestled with a mystery man who turned out to be God. We can now understand that it is our daily struggle in society where we glimpse God face to face. It is in our striving that we are changed for the better.

May we remember Jacob, an imperfect man who teaches us how to strive with God and with humans, and to prevail. Alleluia, Amen.