

Sermon 2010 Pentecost 21 (10-17-10)
Text: Genesis 32:22-30
Theme: "Wrestling with God"

Prayer is a difficult concept for us human beings. From the time we are little children, our sinful nature begins to try and figure out how to get what we want regardless of what is good or what is right. A baby wants to be changed so he cries but he also cries if he is stopped from sticking a toy in the electrical outlet. The bottom line is that he cries when he doesn't get what he wants and while we learn to hide that trait, few of us ever really get over it.

We carry that behavior into prayer as well and we often forget that prayer is not manipulation of God to get what we want but rather the unbelievable privilege to relate to God. It is hard for us because God is not at all like us. We naturally speak the language of selfishness and self-centeredness but God speaks the language of love. If you have ever had to communicate with someone who speaks a language totally different from yours, you might understand this better.

Most of us are used to everyone speaking English and even when we run across someone who speaks only Spanish or Polish, they generally understand about three times more English than we understand of their language so we have some help. I think of a time in Seattle when I made a call on a family who had just fled North Korea. They knew absolutely no English and I knew absolutely no Korean but they were Christians and we were able to draw pictures and communicate, but it was really difficult.

I think that is a little like what prayer is for us. Of course God understands us completely, no doubt, but his language is completely foreign to us. We slowly learn with lots of practice. Our sin is washed away by the waters of our Baptism and we are fed with his pure love as his body and blood enter us at Holy Communion. Slowly, ever so slowly we begin to understand his language but it is not easy. It is like a wrestling match.

Jacob needed to know God and he needed to know him quickly because so far in his life of grappling with people and deception, he had not learned the language. So God met up with him at Jabbok, a place of wrestling, rushing water where two rivers meet, and God grabbed a hold of Jacob and Jacob grabbed a hold of God. Unlike previous opponents, this opponent was not so easy for Jacob to shake off, mislead or conquer. However, neither was Jacob letting go of the Lord and there they stayed rolling around in the dirt until daybreak.

Back in High School in Alabama, I had a friend whose dad was a retired Marine MP. We would wrestle around with him and when all of us were 17 or 18 and hitting 200 pounds, we would figure we could take him because after all – he was really old – like 46! Soon someone would be on the ground begging for mercy and it was never him. He would always say the same thing to whoever was on the ground. "Remember boy, I learned you everything you know. But I aint learned you everything I know!"

So God reached out and touched the very hip socket that he had created and popped it right out of socket! Sometimes wrestling with God involves a little discomfort. We don't always like the lessons he gives to us. But they work. Apparently it worked for Jacob because with the next thing out of his mouth, he was speaking God's language. "Give me a blessing!" And God tested him. "What's your name boy?" And Jacob didn't lie. His name meant one who puts himself before others – it was truly human language. God gave him a better name – Israel – one who wrestles with God and prevails.

We come here today to wrestle with God. We grab a hold of him and he grabs a hold of us and slowly, ever so slowly... we grow. That is what prayer is for, not to get what you want but to learn what you need. In wrestling with God we come to know him in ways that we could never know otherwise. He leads us down a path of lifetime discovery; both discovery of who he is and discovery of who we are and as we grow closer to him we come to understand that prayer is not just a plea for help along the journey but prayer IS the journey. Our whole life is prayer as we learn to speak God's language and that journey is immersed in grace of God – in His Word, in the waters of Baptism, in His body and blood; and that journey ends in paradise.
AMEN