

"The Wrestling Match"

I have fond memories as a kid of my family sitting in our living room (sometimes with relatives there) on a Saturday night, watching wrestling matches! (This was in the earlier days of television). It was a big deal, those Saturday nights! (I like to think those were the glory days of wrestling, when *wrestling was wrestling!* Not what you have today)! Our one son for a couple of years really got into watching wrestling on TV. Nancy and I weren't thrilled about that. We were concerned that it might ruin him for life – but thank heavens it didn't!

In one of the churches I served we had a youth leader who loved professional wrestling. He introduced us to a *Christian wrestlers* organization, and organized some wrestling bouts in town as a Christian outreach. So, you'd see these Christian wrestlers slam each other around in the ring, then afterwards give their testimonies!

Well, there is a famous wrestling match in Scripture described in Genesis, chapter 32. Jacob wrestles with a strange figure at the brook Jabbok, and Jacob realizes this is an encounter with the Almighty! It's here that he receives a *new name*. For the ancient people of Israel, a name was more than just a name. A person's name revealed the *character* of that person. To have your *name* changed signified having you yourself transformed!

Jacob is one of the wrestlers. *Jacob*. What an interesting fellow. The name "Jacob" itself is a giveaway to the kind of person he is. "Jacob" means "he takes by the heel", or "he supplants". Jacob is the "heel-grabber", the "cheat". Remember how he cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright? Then how he tricked his aged, almost blind, father into giving *him* his final blessing, rather than giving it to Esau? Esau became so enraged that he vowed to kill Jacob, and Jacob quickly flees to his mother's brother, Laban, who lives miles away.

Jacob and Laban are a good match for each other! Laban pulls a few fast ones on Jacob. But Jacob is just as bad! For during his 20-year stay with Laban, Jacob manages to outwit his uncle out of a good bit of his wealth and possessions. It's not surprising, then, when Jacob decides it might not be a bad idea to pack up and leave! Jacob takes his large family and belongings and heads back home, hoping that after these 20 years his brother Esau has had time to cool off and let go of his anger.

As he gets closer to home, he sends messengers ahead, and they return with this message: "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, *and four hundred men with him*" (Genesis 32:6). Oh brother! (literally!). The Bible says, "Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed" (Genesis 32:7a). *His life of shady behavior is catching up with him*. He does what many people do when they're scared – he prays! "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children" (Genesis 32:11). Then he makes plans in case his brother attacks him. He sends his family members off a ways, hoping to keep them safe. He sets up quarters by the brook Jabbok for the night, *and he is left all alone*. *Alone* – to reflect on what he's done...and who he is...and what he might have to face the following day when his brother arrives.

There in the night, at Jabbok, God visits Jacob! All night he wrestles and struggles with this

strange Visitor. As morning breaks, the Visitor says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking" (Genesis 32:26a). But Jacob responds: "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26b). The Visitor asks: "*What's your name?*" That's more than just a casual, polite question. Jacob is pushed to expose his *character*, to own up to the kind of person he has been! "C'mon," the Visitor presses, "tell me your name!" "*Jacob.....Jacob....that's my name!*" I'm the heal-grabber. The cheat.

Jacob stands bare before the Almighty - his wily, deceitful, selfish nature exposed before God. He's forced to admit who he is and what he is. And for the first time in his life he *surrenders himself to God!* *For in ancient Hebrew thought, revealing your name to someone gives that person power over you!* When he haltingly says, "My name is Jacob", he's permitting this strange heavenly Visitor *to gain power over his life!*

And in that moment God gives Jacob a new name and a new character! God says to him, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28). *Jacob*, "heal-grabber", "cheat", now becomes *Israel*, "*he who strives with God!*" Amazingly, "the cheat" would be the man for whom the Israelite nation and people would be named.

What's your name? No, not the name you write on school papers, or when you sign checks or sign for a credit card purchase. But the name that describes your *personality and character*. Is your name Timid...Shy...Just Average? Is your name Grump... Complainer? Holier-than-thou...Self-centered? Is your name Courageous ...Compassionate...Dependable? Is it Upbeat...Generous? Encourager...Faithful Disciple? Do you like your name? Do you need a new name? What name would you like God to give you?

Jacob was changed when he encountered God and wrestled with God! *I doubt that anyone can have a genuine encounter with the Living God and stay the same!*

One of the exciting things about the Bible is that it's full of stories of how people are changed by the power of God! When we encounter God...when we encounter Jesus, who is God... we are changed! 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." The New Living Testament has it: "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun." When we turn from our sins and turn our life over to Christ we become a new person. *Our name is changed!* (It's called conversion, the new birth). Our name is changed from Lost to Saved/Redeemed. From Darkness to Light. From Far From God to Member of God's Household.

This basic transformation and re-orientation of our life from self to God doesn't happen just by being religious or going to church, or being a decent citizen. It comes about when, like Jacob, we *surrender our life and our will to God*, as He is revealed in Christ. If you've never done this, I invite you – I urge you – to turn your life over to the Lord and see what amazing changes He can make in you! You get a new name!

But this isn't the end of the story. This is only the beginning of the adventure of God making changes in our life...giving us new names! There are always parts of our life that need to be worked on! Aspects of our life that could be changed for the better. What parts of you don't you like? Where do you need to grow, to mature? What aspects of your personality and character do you think God would like to change and rename? God has the power to do that!

Some of us need a new self-image. This issue of low self-image, low self-esteem, is a real problem for a lot of people. We can get stuck with all sorts of names and labels: We see ourselves as stupid...fat...ugly...weak...incapable...no good. Sometimes these names get stuck on us in early childhood, and we carry them with us into adulthood. We weren't "the pretty one". We weren't "the smart child." We were the "sick one", the "bad kid", the "lazy sibling."

As a counselor, I worked with many clients on this issue. An image was laid on them by a parent or someone else. They internalized it, and believed that defined who they were. (It's called "an introject"). But that most often wasn't who they really were!

Culture does a job on us, too. How can we ever feel good about ourselves when people on TV, in ads, in movies, are so handsome, beautiful, sexy, slim etc.? I remember years ago the superintendent of the local school district, speaking to a group of clergy, talking about the low self-esteem of so many of the students - particularly female students - and what a huge issue it was. I doubt that it's gotten any better over the years.

God wants to give us a new name! A new sense of value and worth. Yes, we are sinners, but we are also created in the image of God, with a huge potential to soar and achieve.

A college student went to a Christian conference where participants were asked to tell what was the most meaningful thing that happened to them recently. The young man said, "Let me tell you. Several weeks ago I had my handwriting analyzed and was told that I am an extrovert. I didn't know that. All my life I have been timid and shy, with a huge inferiority complex. But now all this is changed and I have been having a marvelous time these last few weeks." Maybe you think your name is "Timid", but God says, "No, I'm naming you "Confident". Or your name is "Defeated", but God says, "No, it's Overcomer!"

Most of my life I've seen myself as shy, and timid. Somehow that self-image developed in my early teenaged years. But over the years, some of that has been changing. When I was 30 years old, I left parish ministry. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I felt lost – a failure. I was scared about the future. I went to a psychologist and took a battery of tests to see what kind of work or vocation I might be suitable for. When he went over the results with me the psychologist said I scored high in every area. One sentence he said to me I have never forgotten. He said, "What it means is you can do any damn thing you want." God used that man to give me hope, and more confidence, and a new name!

I believe God wants to set us free from life-long bondage to names and labels that only crush us, and restrict us from becoming the strong, creative people God wants us to be! What new name

might God want to be giving you today? Jacob wrestled with God, and was changed. He got a new name.

Let me share just a few thoughts about how this can relate to *churches*. *Sometimes churches get stuck with names and labels that may or may not define who they really are.* Churches can see themselves as "the little church", "the dying church", "the uppity church", "the unspiritual church", the "difficult church". And these labels can limit a church's ministry and effectiveness.

I served the United Methodist Church in Christiana, PA. I was unexpectedly moved from that church – to a much larger church. Christiana had about 285 members, and the church I was going to had over 700 members. The people at Christiana had a farewell party for our family. I said keep it light; no somber evening. Since I played on the church softball team, they did the farewell around the theme of baseball. One person who spoke said my move was like going to the "big leagues" (i.e., to a big church). When I heard that, my heart sank. When I got the chance to speak, I emphasized that they were not "minor league" at all, that in many ways the people in that church were strong and beautiful people. I meant it – I didn't want to leave, never asked to move to another church, and loved being pastor of that wonderful congregation.

Don't let any negative label define who we are as a church! In reality, we might be "the creative church", "the faithful church", "the changing church", "the welcoming church"!

Here's one other important thing. *The church ought to be a place where people can come and get a new name! A church where people can experience Jesus and His transforming power!* Unfortunately, sometimes churches only add to people's sense of guilt and failure. We criticize one another, sermons keep harping on where we fall short.

How can we in the church help one another experience God and His uplifting power? *Lift up Jesus continually, and His redeeming, life-changing power. Accept people as they are.* I'm thinking of a young lady who began to attend a church I was serving. She visited the church – you couldn't help notice she was very pregnant! She started attending each Sunday. She was friendly, she praised the church, and said she wanted to join. So I met with her. She told me she had a Catholic background. I sensed she was spiritually hungry, and kind of just finding herself. I learned she was not married to the man with whom she was living. So, should I try to correct her, or accept her and her situation? I opted to accept her as she was. Her baby was born. I baptized the child. She joined the membership class, and I saw her come alive in the Lord. It was a beautiful thing! God gave her a new name!

Our job in the church is not to change people, but to accept and love people, and let God do the changing!

Jacob wrestles with God. He said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). *Jacob*, "heel grabber", "cheat", becomes *Israel*, "he who strives with God". God wants to give you and me a new name, to change us for the better, and it can happen when we say to God, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!"

