

## SPR | August 2, 2020 | Kenji Kuramitsu

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

When I was in high school, I spent an ill-suited month on the Glenbrook South Titans wrestling team. And I can recall that during one practice, while we were doing take-down drills, my partner slammed me down on that smelly, blue mat, and I fell in a weird way and I hit my ankle. And I remember the coach looking over at my partner and I on the ground, and then yelling to the rest of the room: “I heard someone yell ouch! That means you’re doing it right! It *should* hurt!” In that moment, I did not feel like a Titan. In fact, I was only on that team for another few weeks before I quit, finding my school’s Cheese Club much better suited to my interests, and being of course much easier on the body.

And I couldn’t help but remember this story as I studied the passage this week of Jacob’s wrestling on the riverbank from Genesis. This part of Genesis documents the drama of the Bible’s very first families – and here, focused on Jacob’s broken relationship with his brother Esau. After many bitter years apart, with divine prompting, Jacob charts a journey of return to his twin, but he prepares to meet his brother like he’s going off to war: this is a family reunion where shrapnel is expected to fly.

And Jacob’s traveling companions are sent ahead of him while he himself camps out alone on the banks of the river. I imagine him perched in the dirt around a sputtering campfire, ruminating, maybe already sparring with anxious dread: “after what I did, is my brother going to restore me or destroy me? Am I making a mistake, is this gonna be a Cain and Abel kind of situation?”

What happens next in the story is a kind of a blur: Jacob’s approached by a stranger. Who is this, why the anger? It’s a brutal, knock-down, drag-out fight, the dust kicks up, to end in sight. Embers cool, untended. The sun begins to rise, a muscle rips, distended – tears and tears and sweat and a terrible embrace – Jacob receives a blessing, sees God’s face. And in the light of day, after the match-it looks like the brothers hug, burying the hatchet. Forgive me, I just watched Hamilton for the first time.

Now, there’s a masculinist way of telling this story, which focuses on the glory and adrenaline of struggle. We love a good battle scene, we watch fights on TV, and in this reading, Jacob’s crucible is interpreted as man vs. man, man vs. self, man vs. God – man always at the center. But I want to invite us to hold off on such an interpretation of this story. Because before the strangle, the stranger, the angel, the demon, before the God

arrives, Jacob must have been faced with the terrible quiet of that evening. The river may have been gurgling around him, the flames cackling lightly, sounds in the brush whispering accusations. Before anyone else even came onto the scene, I wonder if Jacob had his own meeting with his shadow side, with his fears and regrets in a long, dark night of the soul.

Because there's the discernment, the decision, and then there's all the things that you don't see coming, there's the waiting – and as Jacob found out that evening, bards do not write songs about the waiting. But come morning, Jacob is given this blessing: “you have struggled with God and with humans, and have won.”

What does it really mean to struggle with God? I suspect that we don't need to look as far as these ancient stories to know something about this. Maybe you've weathered a difficult diagnosis; had a loss of trust in a relationship that was important to you; found that your faith is evolving beyond its earlier confines.

I bless you because you have struggled with God, and have won.

And then the second part of that blessing also catches my attention, a more accurate translation of the text reads not “humans,” in the gender neutral, but “you have struggled with God and with men.” What does it really mean to struggle with men? Powerful men, predatory men, men as universal stand-in for all humankind?

I bless you because you have struggled with men, and have won.

And then what of those times that our struggle really is both with God and with humans? A natural crisis worsened by “a failure of political leadership.” A betrayal from those we had entrusted most to protect and serve us, pastors, parents, police. And how about those times, too, that our struggle is with our own holy books?

You know the story of Howard Thurman – how he used to read the Bible to his grandmother, and he said that when he was a child, she would always ask him to read the scriptures to her, always telling him to skip over the Pauline epistles. It wasn't until Thurman was older, himself a pastor himself, that he returned to ask her why. During “the slavery days,” his grandmother told him, when the master's pastor would hold services for us slaves, always, he “used as his text *something from Paul*.” Something from Paul: slaves, obey your masters. “Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us.”

Something from Paul — something from Genesis — *something from Leviticus* — how many of us have struggled with God and humans, as we've faced off against interpretations of scripture

that draw death into Creation? Thurman's grandmother wrestled with a God who could claim to love the world while sanctioning slavery, and with the humans who found that the peculiar institution suited them just fine. Thurman himself struggled with a church that claimed to love him, while kindly asking him to sit in the back of the sanctuary.

And again, we may not have to look too far for examples of this struggle in our own common life. As a parish aspiring to antiracism, what can we do besides *struggle* with research that shows that once a parish, a multiracial congregation becomes a certain "tipping point" – reaches a certain percentage of people of color, usually around 50%, that white parishioners will leave that church, and do not return. As a community that claims to take seriously the radical hospitality of Jesus, what else can we do besides wrestle, as we look around at ourselves, and notice who is absent – and ask ourselves what invisible walls we have built to keep them out?

And this is one of the things I love about St. Paul and the Redeemer. We struggle with our faith, with these odd stories that challenge us – and we struggle with each other, refusing to simply ignore those thorns in our sides, the lumps in our throats. We know that our struggling is necessary for us to fully show up fully as ourselves as God has created us to be, in our ministries of service, of feeding, of teaching, in our discernments, in our decisions, and in our waiting.

I want to return, in closing, to the two brothers whose names have been on our lips this morning: Jacob and Esau. Biblical scholars remind us that these twins, locked in archetypal enmity, served as symbolic stand-ins for all their descendants, mapping relationships between ancient readers and the world around them. And as land-based peoples living under the constant threat of mutually-assured destruction by their neighbors and by empires, the writers of Genesis were deeply concerned with family conflict and with tribal warfare. Many of these stories, today's included, actually offer a critique of cycles of escalating, retaliatory violence. The Bible's first pair of brothers, Cain and Abel, stand alone in choosing the way of the weapon: every other family conflict in the book of Genesis between siblings – Joseph and his siblings, Jacob and Esau – they're all resolved without any bloodshed, pointing to a different way.

Indigenous cultures have long enshrined practices that provide alternatives to the patriarchal, the testosterone-fueled account, or a punishment style of relating to each other: in *Hawai'i*, we have a name for such a process, it's called *ho'oponopono*. *Ho'oponopono* means creating righteousness between people, and more generally is a way of using things like prayer, like repentance, like confession, to make things right after a

harm has been done. Elders use the image of a canoer preparing to catch a wave, right, and rather than gearing up for war and more destruction, planting seeds, and being open to the possibility of reconciliation. “Jacob and Esau did each other dirty,” maybe we’d say, “you know, those two boys need go make ho’oponono, need to go make it right.”

Because the repair never could have arrived without this posture of openness, without the invitation, without the waiting, without the struggle.

Maybe, like me, the beginning of August, 2020, you have a whole lot of question marks hanging over your head right now. Maybe some nights you feel like you are just waiting there in the dark, face lit up by the flame of your news feed, while things go bump in the night around you. Or maybe you feel like you’re already thrashing around in the dark, at the mercy of the elements, wondering if you will even make it until dawn.

Wherever you are on this day, my prayer is that you can glance around and see that your essential others are right there next to you, struggling with you, waiting with you, until the morning comes. I feel proud to be a part of a church that checks in on people, that waits in the dark.

And I pray, too, that until that time, we may give thanks to the tender, to the transforming God who waits with us, who is right down on that smelly, blue mat with us, *blessing us* in the fierce holiness of sacred struggle. Amen.