

Like the “Thrilla in Manila,” the fight went for several brutal rounds: “until the breaking of the day,” Scripture says (Genesis 32:24). Jacob won the first two rounds, but then the mystery man asserted himself. During the fifth round, the timing and rhythm of the man improved. At the close of the ninth round, Jacob felt like he was exhausted and close to death. The turning point came midway through the 13th round, when Jacob sent the man flying backwards. In the 14th round, Jacob dredged up his last reserves of power to make sure there would not 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” (Genesis 32:25). The Mystery Man wrestled with Jacob all night; he could have won at any time, but he knew it was the struggle that Jacob needed.

Finally, the man cried out, “Let me go, for the day is breaking,” letting Jacob know that the fight would soon be over. But Jacob, knowing he had lost, replied, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:25-26). This is an important place for each of us to come to in our relationship with God: to know when God conquers our hearts and it is time to surrender to God’s will. God does not mind the struggle, but there is a point where we must acknowledge God’s superiority and agree to serve God who is greater than we are. We cannot conquer much of anything until first God conquers us. Jacob is reduced to the place where all he can do is hold on to the Lord with everything he has. Jacob cannot fight anymore. He cannot rely on his own strength any longer, he could *only* rely on the blessing of God.

Although Jacob didn’t realize it, this would be the answer to his previous prayer for protection (Genesis 32:9-12). Before Jacob could be delivered from the hand of his brother, he had to be delivered from his own self-will and self-reliance. Jacob thought the real enemy was outside of him: his brother Esau. The real enemy was inside him: his own flawed, human nature, which needed to surrender to God.

The man said to him, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). Jacob’s new name is often translated as “The one who strives with God,” a name that describes Jacob and his descendants well. The name may also mean “God strives.” In either case, the root meaning of the word is “striving.” Jacob prevailed in the sense that he endured his struggle with God until the Lord thoroughly conquered him. In our struggles with God, the only way to win is to lose ourselves in God’s grace and by not giving up until we realize that blessing. This was how Jacob prevailed.

Jacob’s wrestling match is truly the “Greatest Fight of All Time” because it teaches us about the importance of striving. Although Jacob felt close to death, he did not quit. Like Muhammad Ali in Manila, Jacob gave it everything he had, and because of his willingness to keep striving, Jacob received a blessing, a new name, and a new future. This, then, was the blessing of wrestling with God: the passing of the old life as Jacob, and the coming of a new life as Israel.

Poet Alexandra Elle wrote a poem that included this line: *I am thankful for my struggle because, without it, I wouldn’t have stumbled upon my strength.* She writes:

“Everything I’ve ever walked through has been a lesson. Being a human is complex and extremely hard sometimes. We all have our struggles, pain, and moments of suffering. But what I learned through the lows of my life, through the mud of my trauma, and in the thick of my darkest days is that the light can and will return. We live in a world that idolizes ‘no worries’ and being positive even when things feel their heaviest. Something I’ve learned over the many years I’ve been healing and growing is that it’s okay to not see the bright side all of the time. It’s okay to give ourselves permission to be with and in our pain. Why? Because more times than not, we refuse to look at what stings and causes the suffering to begin with. Ignoring our heaviness will not lighten the load. Facing it can set us free.”

The same is true for us. Life is a struggle: a great, big, messy, demanding, exhausting struggle. Friendships and marriage can be struggles; but if we work hard, these relationships bring great blessings. Finding your life’s work can be a struggle, and it can take years of trial and error before we find our true calling; but finding your life’s work is the blessing. Parenting can be a struggle, with the same sleepless nights and pain that Jacob endured; but parents don’t have to be perfect, they just need to stay engaged and realize that the struggle is the blessing. Scripture reminds us to keep striving until the morning dawns and the blessing comes.

Jacob is a role model for this kind of striving; Jacob, a man who had many flaws and failings, but who stayed engaged, even through a time of great 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. Jesus could have walked away from the cross at numerous points in his life, but he refused to do it. Jesus remained engaged, giving himself 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. Jesus 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 remember the striving of Jesus and of 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” because it was in that place that Jacob came “face to face” with God (Genesis 32:30). The Lord’s Supper is our Peniel: it is where we meet God face to face, and where we receive the gift of Christ’s salvific body and blood.

Christian writer Frederick Buechner reflected: “Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, [belong to those] who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight — God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, [God] demands of us everything; before giving us life, [God] demands our lives — our selves, our wills, our treasure....Will we give them, you and I? I do not know. Only remember the last glimpse that we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of the defeat which is victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.”

At Peniel, Jacob wrestled with God. Like the Thrilla in Manila, his fight was a “mirror to society and the soul.” When we look into this mirror, we see that it is in our daily struggles where we glimpse God face to face. It is in our striving that we are changed for the better. It is in the scuffle that we are enriched as people and as disciples. Jacob, the imperfect man, teaches us how to strive with God and with humans, and how to prevail.

Prayer: Lord God of my life, I come to You today with my fears and my troubles. You know what is ahead of me. I do not lean on my own strength or good works, but on Your great grace. Thank You for every promise You have spoken. When I am weak and afraid, give me the grit to hold fast to You. Do not let me go; but bless me that I may walk forward depending completely on You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Source:

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And the Winner Is ...

Sunday, August 2, 2026
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Genesis 32:22-31

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, Ali said, “He’s too ugly to be the world champ. The world champ should be pretty like me!” Ali mocked Joe Frazier as ignorant, calling him “the Gorilla.” Ali believed in himself, saying that “it’s not bragging if you can back it up.” But sometimes his arrogance backfired: on board a plane preparing for takeoff, the flight attendant told Ali 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 lost the “Fight of the Century” against Joe Frazier. In 1974, Ali beat George Foreman in the “Rumble in the Jungle.” In 1975, Ali fought Frazier again in the “Thrilla in Manila,” a match still called the “Greatest Fight of All Time.” The match was the first ever broadcast live by satellite; hundreds of millions of people watched worldwide. Journalist Vann Newkirk writes, “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...so began the Thrilla in Manila.”

The Ali-Frazier heavyweight fight was thrilling, but so was the wrestling match between Jacob and a mysterious man. The leadup to this match is the falling-out between Jacob and Esau. Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright, then fled from Canaan and lived with Laban, his uncle, in northern Mesopotamia. There he acquired wealth, married two wives, and fathered a dozen sons; but Jacob’s relations with Laban soured when he prospered at his uncle’s expense. Forced to flee again, Jacob returned to Canaan where Esau met him with a large force of armed men. Fearing the worst, Jacob sent his family and possessions across the Jabbok River, remaining behind, alone 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” (Genesis 32:24). Jacob did not wrestle with the man; the man wrestled with Jacob. The Mystery Man is sometimes referred to as an Angel of God and sometimes as Jesus, making a special appearance in the Old Testament. Whoever it was, God wanted something from Jacob: God wanted the sacrifice of all of Jacob’s proud self-reliance and worldly scheming, and God came to take these, by force if necessary. The bell rang and Jacob fought the man.