

“Wrestling with God”
Genesis 32:22-31 Matthew 14:13-21
July 26, 2026

Most of us aren't that keen on adversity, turmoil, struggles ... conflict. Sure, there are some folks who seem to go through life looking for trouble, “spoiling for a fight.” But, for the main part, many of us will go to considerable lengths to avoid the very real pain and dis-ease that adversity and conflict inevitably bring.



Jacob knew about conflict and struggle – some of it brought on by his own decisions and actions. Years before we meet him today, he had cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright. Almost from his birth, he connived and schemed to get what he wanted, no matter the cost to someone else. We join him today on his journey back home, back to where his much larger and stronger and angrier twin brother still lives. Jacob is uncertain, unsettled, afraid – more so with every step that passes beneath his feet. In an attempt to smooth things over with Esau, Jacob sends one gift after another. The servants deliver each collection of gifts – rather extravagant gifts: 200 female and 20 male goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 30 milking camels with their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; and 20 female and 10 male donkeys. [cf. Genesis 32:13-15] And these servants are to make sure that Esau knows from whom the gifts have come. The rehearsed accompanying speech, to be issued with each gift is, “They belong to your [Esau's] servant Jacob and they are a present sent to my lord Esau, and moreover he is behind us.” [Genesis 32:17-18]

The response is less than encouraging. Not only is Esau silent, but the servants return telling Jacob that Esau is coming out to meet him – Esau and 400 men!!

Ever the shrewd contriver Jacob, divides his people, his family and his flocks into two groups, thereby ensuring that at least half of his loved ones and his wealth will be safe from any long-promised, long-feared attack by Esau.

Finally, Jacob sends everyone and all the rest of what he owns across the river Jabbok, while he remains behind, praying for protection from Esau. Alone now, and waiting for dawn and the inevitable meeting with his brother, Jacob spends the night – the entire night – wrestling with – could it be God? As dawn is breaking, the Jacob's combatant prepares to leave, whereupon Jacob demands that he first give Jacob a blessing. Jacob is given a new name, Israel, symbolic of a whole new beginning. Jacob has now made himself available to God.

The story tells us that when Jacob and Esau meet, despite Jacob's terror, Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, and together they weep.

Struggles abound in our lives, not the least of which is how we cope with all the hurt and misery in the world around us, the world God loves, the world Jesus came to save, the world to which God would have us reach out with compassion and generosity, with the good news of the gospel and healing.

Jesus also knew this struggle. In the snippet from his life that we read this morning, he has just learned of the brutal death of his cousin, his friend, John the Baptist. He seeks solitude and some time apart with God. The crowds see him leave in a boat and follow him on land, meeting him when he comes ashore. Compassion for those who are hurting and in need

overrides his grief, and he spends the day healing the sick. Evening is descending and still the crowds are with him – in this deserted place. The disciples get practical, suggesting that the people be sent off to get some food.

Jesus' response to the disciples that day is the same response he makes to us today. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

The disciples struggled with the same reality with which we struggle – the reality of inadequacy, of being insufficient for the needs around them. And Jesus' response to them that day is the same response he makes to us today. "Bring them here to me." Bring whatever you have, whoever you are to me.

"When he went ashore, Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them,"
[Matthew 14:14]

We are never asked to give what we don't have, to be who we aren't. However, we are called to give who we are and all we have, with compassion and generosity – to do what we can, where we are, with what we have.

Again, "it is forever not one's ability but [one's] availability that matters with God."
Amen.