

By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is Pastor at First Baptist Church of Bainbridge, NY and serves on the Executive Boards for NYS Ministers Council and the American Baptist Churches NYS Region.

### Hope is Built Into Struggle

I don't know about you, but for me if something is bothering me it's going to hit me about 3 a.m. and I am going to wrestle with it until God somehow gives me a *blessing*. The blessing usually comes either in the form of a long pre-dawn e-mail to a trusted friend; or an honest discussion with God involving confession and repentance followed by God's forgiveness and mercy. Once God allows me to make peace with it I can finally rest.

In [Genesis 32:22-32](#) - Jacob wrestles with "a man"; some say this is the angel of the Lord, some say he is wrestling with God, some say it is his brother Esau whom he is getting ready to meet after years of estrangement (read the whole of Chapter 32 for the background story), and some say it was an inner struggle with all of the sins and missteps that he had taken throughout his life - sort of like the way we struggle within ourselves when we know we have done something wrong, hurt someone's feelings, or are worried about an outcome.



Perhaps Jacob is wrestling with how he wronged his brother in their early childhood: how he bargained him out of his birthright, and cheated him (with the help of his mother) out of his father's blessing. ([Gen. 25:29-34](#), [Gen. 27](#).) As he returns to reconcile with his brother, he struggles with the things that his brother *could* hold against him, and invents in his mind ways that his brother may take revenge.

Tired from the journey so far, in the night Jacob wrestles—he wrestles *until daybreak* – until he receives a blessing. And in his fight for the blessing, he is permanently wounded - his hip is put out of joint. From that point on Jacob walks with a limp. But in his striving and in his blessing Jacob is changed forever, and he receives a new name: “You shall no longer be called Jacob (which means he *takes by the heel*, or *he supplants*); but Israel (*one who strives with God*), for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.

Sister Joan Chittister based her book *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* on this story about Jacob and his wrestling match with God. In it she tries to determine

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how some people come through struggle “whole of heart and sure of soul...and [tries to determine] what was missing in the lives of those others who seemed to slog through life, sure only that tomorrow would be worse than yesterday.” She writes about hope in the midst of struggle. She says, “Through Jacob’s story I began to understand both the cycle of struggle and the seeds of hope that had sprung out of them in my own life.” She wrote the book “to help readers analyze their own stories of pain and despair, of hope and resurrection...”. And to help us identify “the gifts that struggle can give to us all.” She says, “hope and struggle are of a piece...hope is built into struggle.” (p. xi)

Hope is built into struggle. We do not struggle or wrestle with something unless we have the hope of change. Our text does not say *why* Jacob wrestled with this stranger it only says that he did, all night long, and he wasn’t going to let go until he received a blessing.

That is what we have to do sometimes, keep at a thing, wrestle with it and not let go until we see the blessing in it. For example, we wrestle with these restrictions that are imposed upon us for the safety of those with whom we come into contact. We struggle with the change this makes in all of our lives. It causes us to wrestle with choices—should I or shouldn’t I do this or that. For me the struggle has brought the blessing of fewer positive tests, fewer people admitted to the hospital, and fewer deaths. Yes, I’ve had to give up some car shows, some dancing, some playing at enchanted forest, some overnights with my grandchildren, but the blessing is that fewer have gotten sick. It is difficult to see at this point what sort of permanent limp we may end up with because of this world wide crisis, but I am sure that through God’s grace and blessing, will transform it to hope.

One thing I do know is that our world has somehow gotten much smaller. Perhaps one of the blessings is that we can see how our communication as a world community is so important to the welfare of us *all*. More and more we can see that we are one community in the one body, one people; when one of us suffers, we all suffer together. ([1 Cor. 12:26](#))

Martin Luther King Jr. said it this way, ““In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men (and women) are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...”. *In other words, when one of us suffers we all suffer together.*

Every true blessing in life comes at a cost. Jacob came out of his struggle with a limp, his brother forgave him and Jacob made restitution. And thank God his family was safe. What is your blessing from the wrestling that makes you limp? In other words, what is the cost of your service to God in Christ Jesus?

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