



**SERMON**  
**10/20/19**

***Wrestling with God, we learn, love, and live on together***

Last weekend, Dave and I traveled to Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. It's gorgeous there and we try to visit each year on the weekend that is typically "the peak" of fall leaf color.

This year, we invited Dave's brother and sister-in-law to travel with us. It was fun showing them around, but it was the first time we've taken a trip together in the same car. After a 10-minute ride with me driving, Ken joked that I have a lead foot! (In my defense, we were driving to a restaurant where we had a reservation we didn't want to miss! Besides, I was only doing the speed limit plus five.)

After admitting his frustration with those who drive too fast, he acknowledged the wisdom of his wife, Marianne. She always reminds him that we don't know what other people may be going through. Are they hurrying to get to work on time so they don't lose the job they need as a single parent? Might they be rushing to the hospital to witness a birth or a death?

***Hidden figures all around us***

This conversation reminded me of a video from chaplaincy training. Some of you who work in healthcare might have seen it already, but I decided to share it this morning. It's a good reminder: whether walking down a hospital corridor or the street where we live, we don't know what the people we encounter may be going through.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj\\_q-o8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8)

Since chaplaincy training, I've often thought of this video. Now, of course, not everyone we meet is currently experiencing a significant life experiences, but we are each carrying something – even a seemingly smaller concern – that others don't know.

In this way, the strangers we encounter - and also our co-workers, friends, and family members - are hidden figures to us in some respects.

When we gather together here from our various lives, there's a sense in which we are hidden figures to one another, too. We may know something about what those closest to us are wrestling with, but we don't know all that everyone here has experienced or is experiencing.

### ***Wrestling all night***

In this morning's story from Genesis, it's the night before Jacob will finally face the brother from whom he is estranged. Years before, he'd cheated Esau out of both his birthright and their father's blessing; and had then run away by himself. Now he's on his way back home with a large household and hundreds of animals.

Having heard that Esau is riding out with 400 men to meet him, Jacob is terrified for his life.

Facing what looks like his brother's revenge, he divides the people and animals traveling with him into two groups – reasoning that if Esau decimates one, the other might escape. Jacob begs God for protection for himself and his wives and slaves and their children. Then – for good measure - he sends five large gifts to Esau – herds of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys - each herd presented with space between the next for maximum effect.

When the sun rises, the day of reckoning will be here. Will the prayers and gifts be enough?

No wonder Jacob is awake all night tossing and turning! Was he grappling with all that had happened over the years? Second-guessing his own choices?

We read that he was wrestling – but with whom? Was it an angel as some Jewish and Christian scholars believe? The text says, “a *man* wrestled with him until daybreak.” (32:24) But then, as *The Message* records the story, the man himself tells Jacob, “you’ve wrestled with *God*.” (32:28) (The NRSV says, “you’ve striven with God and with humans...”)

But focusing on who Jacob wrestled may miss the point. Whoever it was, there was something divine in the wrestling. Jacob named the place Peniel (meaning God's face), saying, “I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!” (32:30)



### ***Seeing the face of God***

Jacob's iconic story inspired countless works of art, including the one pictured on the front of your bulletin. The artist is Eugene Delacroix; the painting is dated between 1856 and 1861. As poet Joseph Stanton notes, "Jacob is wrestling...as if he expects to win. The powerful diagonal of his musculature drives hard to the left: a wedge of fierce resolve." (The wrestling theme is further underscored by the mighty twisted trees.) <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20191019528270110&code=ACT&RC=48070&Row=14>

But what captivates me most about this work of art – especially in light of this series on hidden figures – are the people Delacroix depicts in the bottom right corner of the painting. The woman carrying the jug of water on her head. The man herding sheep. The woman riding a camel. The man on a horse. These mostly hidden figures in the story – slaves, wives, and children - obviously faced significant challenges in each of their own lives. As they went about their daily tasks, what unrecorded struggles were they wrestling with?

As with many other stories in the Bible, Jacob's iconic tale survived and was handed down to us today at least in part because there was something about it that was universally accessible to human experience.

Jacob – the powerful patriarch - showed up limping. Of course, those around him would have asked, "What *happened* to you?" His story got told and spread quickly throughout the camp – perhaps even being acted out around fires the following night. Then it was repeated over and over again from generation to generation, something about it ringing true as hidden people across the centuries heard it and thought of their own fearful sleepless nights.

### ***Learning, loving, and living on together***

Like Jacob and those who traveled with him, we all wrestle with big questions sooner or later. A community of faith and life can be a place to tell our stories and to test and discern their meaning. Wrestling and learning together can open our minds and hearts in ways that just aren't possible alone.

Drawn together by the Spirit, our perspectives can widen in ways that can make us more compassionate and loving, and give us the wisdom and courage we need

to return to our daily lives more determined and able to live on with integrity as we try to follow the example of Jesus.

In the process, we, too, may glimpse the face of God.

That happened a few weeks ago at Camp Hebron where many of us spent time Saturday morning sharing with other CMCLers about some of the questions we are currently wrestling with. How to:

- find a way to live and be in the world as it is right now
- parent children wisely
- navigate family conflicts
- face grief and loss and our own mortality
- find new purpose in times of transition
- live and die well
- leave a legacy
- seek God and find hope in the midst of it all

These were holy conversations; and these are deeply spiritual questions that need ongoing conversation partners with whom to wrestle.

As someone said in one of our first 70+ gatherings, we may belong to other kinds of groups that are good in their own ways. Here, many of us are looking for a community that's not afraid to be vulnerable and go deep when it comes to faith and life.

Since coming to Community Mennonite a year ago, I've been moved to find that this is a congregation that does intentionally make space to authentically bring ourselves and what we're wrestling with. In such a community, we can risk becoming less hidden.

- On Sundays, ACE peer group gatherings are one place we can do that. These just started a few weeks ago, and the ACE Committee has some tools that your group can use to decide how best to spend your precious time together.
- Throughout the week, small groups can be an *intergenerational* way to build meaningful relationships. Stay tuned for some ideas from the Small Group Committee about new ways that groups can form and meet.

- I'm also looking forward to the *This I Believe* series during worship again in November. (We invite you to consider sharing some of your story of faith and life. See this morning's bulletin insert for more on that.)

Catholic poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama says, "Stories and questions and lives lived well with imagination can open up the spaciousness of what it means to be human." In the middle of a world that often feels chaotic and unsettling, Ó Tuama calls on us all to build relationships of meaning and trust – "a place [we] can stand when [our] feet are sore."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJfBYz6tab8>

This is an Anabaptist community that seeks to be such a place of meaning and trust – for the good of ourselves and the good of the world. As one way to be that place this morning, I'd like to close by inviting us to pray *Sunday prayer* together. (This is an adapted version of one of Ó Tuama's prayers and you'll find it in your bulletin insert.)

I'll read the light type; let's read the dark type together.

### **Sunday prayer**

We begin our week together,  
**honoring this life, with all its potentials and possibilities.**

We begin our week with trust,  
**knowing we are created for loving encounter.**

We begin our week with hope,  
**knowing the week can hold  
love, kindness,  
forgiveness and justice.**

We recall our last week.  
**May we learn, may we love,  
may we live on.**

We make room for the unexpected.  
**May we find wisdom and life**

**in the unexpected.**

Help us to embrace possibility,  
respond graciously to disappointment  
and hold tenderly those we encounter.

**Help us be fully present this week.**

We pray for all whose week will be difficult.

**May we support, may we listen,  
may we change.**

We resolve to live life in its fullness.

**We will welcome the people who'll be part of this week.**

**We will greet God in ordinary and hidden moments.**

**We will live the life we are living.**

May we find the wisdom we need.

**God be with us.**

May we hear the needs of those we meet.

**God be with us.**

May we love the life that we are given.

**God be with us.**

**Amen 😊**

*(Adapted from "Morning prayer" by Pádraig Ó Tuama, Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community, pp. 3-4.)*