

The Good Struggle—Jerome Stueart

Oct 17, 2010

There's a lot in today's lectionary—a lot of really good nuggets of truth. But I hit the story of **Jacob and the Angel** and it felt like the key to something. Whenever I see Jacob wrestling with the angel, I often think about how we wrestle with our own faith. It's the easiest metaphor to fit. That we wrestle to find the truth, that we **struggle to get something out of God**—and that we beg him to bless us. This is a very human moment—to struggle with God—to struggle to understand what is right, what is true. Some people think that struggle and doubt are bad—but I think it's a sign of life, of intelligence, and of someone who really wants to understand.

Part of our struggle might come from just **not being sure of exactly what God meant** or said...or **struggling with parts of the bible** that conflict with each other.

It would have been much easier if Jesus had actually written his own gospel. Certainly I bet the disciples were thinking this about the time he was ready to go back to Heaven. You can imagine them asking each other, "Did anyone videotape this? Anyone have a recorder?" If Jesus had come today, he would have been splashed all over Youtube.

Why would Jesus would have used such a **faulty method** for recording the gospels—that we can only keep what we can remember—if the words were going to be so important?

We have to think that Jesus wouldn't have done this method if the product wasn't going to be close to what he wanted to say. He would have sent some caveat or **Parental warning on the front saying: this product may have been marred or broken in the shipping, the packaging may have been faulty, the delivery poor.** But he seemed to think this was a good idea—despite more than a few groups struggling over what you and I would eventually call "The Bible." Did we get the important words? We must have, I think. An omnipotent God would have known that this was a game of telephone where the words change with every speaker...

There's a **science fiction short story** written by Ray Bradbury about a man who has gone to a far planet and he's calling his wife on the phone. He's been gone for a long time. But now the rotation of the planet is right, the distance is closer, and they have one chance to talk to each other. But the woman is advised that the message will take so long that it could be lost along the way, it could be static, garbled. They don't know. She waits by the phone. I think it was for the whole day. When the phone rings, finally—she picks up the receiver and hears nothing for a long time, and then static, and then garbled. And then, just one word that she can make out---

love, repeated as if in a loop. And she's satisfied. That of all the words he said—that one is the one that got through.

I think **we should consider that to be the most important concept in the Bible** that got through—this inexplicable crazy, sacrificial, break-all-the-rules love that God loves us. That's the nugget to hold onto—even when you are doubting everything else. We can't stop there, but we can hold onto it.

I have to think that he chose this weak and fallible method to show how powerful he really is. He likes doing that. He likes setting up a bad example---“corrupt judges” who do the right thing, “bad fathers” who do the right thing--- how much more so, Jesus gets to say, will God who loves us do the right thing if even these bad people do good things?

Several scriptures reveal that God likes using what other people throw away to show how really amazing God is—that he uses farmers, shepherds, accountants, little kids, the runty last son of a long line of better sons, the spoiled dreamer in amongst all of Jacob's hard-working sons, the prostitute in Jericho, the list goes on---what the stone builders have thrown away has become the cornerstone, he said of himself. And he also said, I use the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. He doesn't want a sure-fire method—**he trusts the power of words to survive on their own**, which is -if you think about—really interesting.

Two of the passages we looked at this morning in the lectionary talk about the power of words: that God's new covenant would be written on people's hearts. That they wouldn't have to memorize or make sure they heard—but that the very promises of God would be enscripted on their hearts.

The second was Paul's encouragement to Timothy—we know verse 16 nearly by heart, but it's the surrounding passages, I think, that actually hold more power. Let's read them again:

3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,

3:15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

3:16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

3:17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and

the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you:

4:2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

4:3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,

4:4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

4:5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

These aren't people who've never heard of Christ—these are people like us. These are people who have turned away from listening to the truth and found their own version that makes them happy. They cease being challenged. It's interesting that **we end up actually struggling not only with God, but with people in our own faith**—often about matters of faith, and matters pertaining to the interpretation of the Bible. And that can be very distressing. And sad. That the book handed down to us with a huge message of love—of a God who so loved the world that he gave us Jesus, that we have the chance to know God ourselves, and that we have the chance to live with him now, and forever---these are amazing things, why aren't we rejoicing more—that this message gets traded in for a message about control, about judgment, about rejection, about behavior, and about conformity. **It doesn't diminish the righteousness of God to say he is a God of love.**

But these things cause struggle with each other. And that nugget of what we held on to—that word LOVE—it's hard not to lose grip on it. They make us hurt. They make us mad. They make us fight. It wasn't so different with Jesus—his fights weren't with gangs of thugs; they were with the religious scholars of his day. Wouldn't it be better if we all just got along? Um, Jesus spoke the truth anyway—he didn't alter his message so that he and the Pharisees could lock arms and all go to Starbucks later. It got him killed, yes, but he knew when the struggle was going to be good.

Paul says “be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, convince, rebuke and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching.”

Don't let go. Don't let go of the message you have, and of giving it to the people who need to hear it, even when they don't want to hear it.

Don't let go. Don't be afraid of struggle. Jacob didn't give in when the Angel tried to leave. He knew the struggle was worth it. That he would be blessed.

These two struggles, I have to believe, are good for us.

When I was a kid growing up in a Southern Baptist church, we were told the stories of the Bible every Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and every summer through Vacation Bible School. Those stories stayed with me. The scriptures I memorized stayed with me.

But at the moment I grew up and started to ask questions, I was just given “the answers”—and I got to start believing that any question I asked would have “an answer”... and that I needn’t struggle so much. Many people at my churches wondered why I wanted to question anything. They were very happy with the answers. But you know, sometimes the answers I got didn’t really add up to what I was reading here, or experiencing...and asking questions held up the Sunday School class which was only long enough to get through the lesson (they saved five minutes at the end for questions)

Look at what Paul says about those people who just stop challenging themselves. They gather around them what they want to believe. They don’t want to hear anything new. Certainly in Paul’s time, the gospels were being realized as falling under the heading of “inspired scripture” and some were saying that Paul’s letters were too. And even after Paul died, John wrote Revelation and it got into the Bible...so maybe we should listen to new things, let them challenge us, not let go of what we know is true, what we learned, what we fought for—but listen to God who is still speaking, as he was still speaking in Paul’s time, and after...and Paul listened.

This is a challenge to everyone, not just the other church down the street, but ourselves who may even stop struggling or challenging ourselves after we find that “love” is the “answer”. Holy cow, love has to be unpacked and once inside us, Love challenges us every day to care in a way we may feel uncomfortable. To get the idea of love first, means that we will be struggling with other concepts in the Bible too, other ideas we run into—and that’s good.

Today, I’m saying that we are going to struggle and that it is that struggle that lets us know that we are doing great. That struggling with our faith is okay—as long as we keep growing in the faith, and we hold on to that one thing we know is true: God loves us. God loves us. God loves us.

God is for justice, too, as we can see in the Timothy verses—he wants us to confront others with the truth, not be content to merely find it ourselves. Because God is for struggling with others in the faith, to help them grow. He wants everyone to share that difficult, but blessed wrestling match. We must share what we know, what we learn, what we struggled to get. **They need it too—because struggling with them, helps them to grapple with their own faith—and we get to keep what we remember and what we struggled to get.** God wants us struggling with him, wrestling with him, for in that wrestling, if we hold on, he will bless us.

It is the struggle that makes us living, growing Christians. God bless the struggle.
Success to your struggle, or as the Klingons would say, **Kaplah!**