

Fighting God (Genesis 32:22-31)

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Last Christmas, a friend sent me a gift. It's a framed black-and-white cartoon of a grown man and a little girl. The man's arm is extended, and his long fingers press gently against the child's forehead. There's a look on his face of supreme... acceptance? patience? amusement?

The girl, meanwhile, is fury personified. Her pigtails are flying, her fists and teeth are clenched, and her feet look like they're moving so fast they'll never hit the ground again. She's headed for the man with all the spitfire intensity of a bull aimed at a red cape, and though her arms are too short to reach him, it's clear she wants to knock him to the ground.

"It's you," my friend explained in the note accompanying the gift. "It's you, fighting God."

My friend knows me well; this is what I do. I fight with God. Like Jacob wrestling an angel in the pre-dawn darkness, I ram myself into my maker. I do this in my writing, in my thoughts, and through my prayers. Where God and I are concerned, I'm a wrestler.

It took me a long time to accept this about myself. Eventually I even came to like it.

I was six or seven years old--a little kid in Sunday School--when I first heard the story of Jacob's midnight wrestling match by the River Jabbok. The story terrified me. A stranger leaping out of the darkness? A pitched battle that lasts for hours? An angel

who wounds before he blesses? The whole narrative struck me as ominous, the stuff of horror movies and nightmares.

I realize now that it also struck me as inconsistent with the God I'd been raised to imagine and worship. As a child and a teenager, I thought of God as terribly fragile. Easily offended, easily upset, easily put off. My job as a good Christian girl was to obey the rules and keep this delicate divinity happy at all costs. One false turn, one impertinent question, one sullied bit of doctrine--and God would shatter like a fine china teacup knocked off a table.

Thankfully, I no longer think of God as breakable. Stories like Jacob's excite and inspire me now, because they point to a God who is infinitely more interesting than the one I feared in childhood. A God who *wants* to engage? A God I can come at with the whole weight of my thoughts, questions, ideas, and feelings? A God who invites my rigor, my persistence, my intensity? That's a God worth pursuing. That's a God I won't let go of.

Wrestling, as it turns out, is not a bad or even a scary thing, because it's the opposite of apathy, the opposite of resignation. It's even the opposite of loneliness. To fight is to stay close, to keep my arms wrapped tight around my opponent. Fighting means I haven't walked away--I still have skin in the game.

God, it seems, delights in those who dare to strive with him. If Jacob's experience is any indication, then God rejoices when God's children strive and prevail. There is a blessing well worth the earning.