

LSBC Sermon August 2, 2020 Charlie Fuller

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Title: *Wrestling with God*

Most of us have spent significant time in school. Young and old, we've all had to take tests. Multiple choice, True/False, Essay. SAT, ACT, GRE, LSAT. From first grade to doctoral study, there is testing everywhere.

I've been on both sides, like many of you. I've taken a lot of tests and I've given a lot of tests. Tests are just sort of a given. We don't question their existence as much as we question our own performance on them. What really are the purposes of testing?

The public school teachers in this audience will bristle at the very word "testing" because of how testing has become an ingrained part of our political discourse about public education. Criticisms of testing include "teaching to the test" and the fact that testing has become a multi-billion-dollar industry.

Testing is all around us. It's pervasive and constant.

What are the purposes of tests?

According to the Glossary for Educational Reform, tests, or what they call summative assessments, are defined by three criteria:

- They are used to determine whether students have learned what they were expected to learn or to level or degree to which students have learned the material.
- They may be used to measure learning progress and achievement and to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs. Tests may also measure student progress toward stated improvement goals or to determine student placement in programs.
- They are recorded as scores or grades for a student's academic record for a report card or for admission to higher education.

Testing is all around us. We're all being tested in one way or another. My dad was in charge of internal audit of the bank for which he worked back in the day. I can tell you that when the bank examiners were in town, we knew to be careful around dad. It was his time of testing.

We've got one more Sunday with Jacob. You may remember Jacob was the son of Isaac who was the son of Abraham. They were all the recipients of God's promise to be with them forever and to make of their family a great nation. But Jacob tricked his father out of both the birthright and the blessing that rightfully belonged to his first-born brother, Esau. Understandably, Esau's not very happy with his little brother so Jacob high tails it to his mother's brother's place to get away from Esau and find a wife. It turns out that Jacob wasn't the only deceiver in the family. After being deceived himself

by his uncle, he finally gets more wives than he bargained for and they start a family. After he gets established, he determines that it's time to go home, back to Canaan. His brother Esau may still be angry with him, but he's got to get away from his Uncle Laban and make his own way in the world. It's on the way home that we find Jacob in today's text. Alone and wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok.

It's sort of a strange story. Jacob sends his family and his entire entourage across the river and he stays behind all by himself. In the middle of the night he wrestles with someone. He wrestles all night long and never gives up. When dawn breaks on the riverbank, he realizes he's been wrestling with God. Jacob won't let go until God blesses him. Jacob didn't give in even when his hip went out of socket. So, God renames Jacob, Israel, which means basically "tenacious wrestler."

Jacob passed the test. His gold star was a new name. Israel. Tenacious wrestler. He didn't give up. He didn't let go. He held on for the whole night. Do you think it was Jacob's persistence that was being tested? This guy worked fourteen years to get the wife of his dreams and still has to be tested? Yep. But why? Seriously, this guy who worked for his Uncle Laban for fourteen years in order to marry Rachel has to have his persistence tested? Why?

Back in the day I was appointed to a faculty study group at Ouachita Baptist University working on portfolios. We read research about what should be included in a portfolio, how they were best organized, and how they should be used to improve scholarship. One of the findings we saw in almost every piece of research was that the value of a portfolio is almost nil if it's used for promotion or salary review. If they're used for either of those purposes, the person doing the portfolio will avoid the honest work of addressing their deficiencies. Every piece we read said that. So, what happened when our university decided to require faculty members to do portfolios? They used them for tenure/promotion and salary reviews.

Jacob was by himself on the banks of the Jabbok for a reason. He was alone with God. Being alone with God allowed him to address his deficiencies, to truly wrestle with who he was and what he was about. Was he acting on the promise God had made? Were his actions lining up with who he was? What had he learned from being deceived by his Uncle Laban? Would Jacob choose to be more honest in his dealings with others? And how was he going to get forgiveness from his brother, Esau?

Those were the things that Jacob was wrestling with there at the river bank.

Jacob is *alone* wrestling with God so that he can be honest with himself and with God. He's also alone where he can feel free to be honest with himself about who he is and what he's about. There on the riverbank, he addressed God, God actually present. And there the covenant made so long ago to his ancestors became real once again.

When God and Jacob wrestled that night, God was testing Jacob. But Jacob was also testing himself. Jacob's night of wrestling drove home his own commitment to God's

promise. That night he owned it and learned that he had what it took to carry out his part of the covenant. He learned through an entire nighttime of wrestling that he had the persistence to take the promise all the way. God learned that about Jacob, but more importantly, Jacob learned that about himself. Because he was alone and had no one else to impress. His wrestling wouldn't be used for tenure review. It was only for his own use – and God's.

In 1994, I decided to see if I could do something I'd always dreamed of doing. I started training to run a marathon. I got a couple of books, studied the right way to train, learned the right stretches, and built a training schedule. I wasn't doing it for anyone but myself. I did it simply to see if I could do it.

I did it to learn something about myself. Did I have the persistence to do the training required to run a marathon? Did I have the persistence to actually finish? I wrestled by my own river Jabbok. And I finished. Through the following years, I finished six more. And I learned something from each of them.

There's another part of this story worth lingering over. Jacob didn't let go of God, didn't let go of the promise, but it cost him a limp. Jacob, now named Israel would be marked by a limp the rest of his life. A limp that was a constant reminder of how he had persevered, how he had held on, how he hadn't given up not just for the whole night, but for his entire life. The limp reminded him that God had made the promise to the right person. That in spite of his own brokenness, in spite of his own mistakes, in spite of his history of deception, God would be faithful to use him to work God's purpose to bless the world through him.

God makes the same promise to us. Henri Nowen says it like this:

We seldom realize fully that we are sent to fulfill God-given tasks. We act as if we were simply dropped down in creation and have to decide to entertain ourselves until we die. But we were sent into the world by God, just as Jesus was [just as Jacob was]. Once we start living our lives with that conviction, we will soon know what we were sent to do.

May it be so.

Amen.