

Dismiss, Dispense or Declare?

Like many in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jim's grandpa Bull was into profession wrestling. St. Louis was considered one of the premier venues for the pros and channel 11 carried most all the matches. Though much has changed in pro wrestling since, the hype, exaggerations and "no holds barred" were very much a part of wrestling as grandpa Bull understood it. When Jim began wrestling in high school, grandpa Bull was very apprehensive. It was difficult for him to imagine his young grandson in the thick of the channel 11 wrestling experience. For him to learn the difference between wrestling as he knew it and high school grappling changed everything.

Wrestling, or grappling, or as I like to phrase it, pondering, is an ongoing aspect of life. Peace, purpose, growth and faith all spring forth only when one grapples with their beliefs and their understandings. When Jacob reached the point where he needed to face the reality that his ways of living had created, as he headed back to face the brother he had run in fear from, the brother he had cheated, he wrestled. Some classify his opponent as an "angel" others as God, God's self, either way Jacob had to hold his life along side of the will and way of God and it was not an easy connecting. For Jacob to move into the next phase of his life, and of God's design for that life, he had to have his hip put out of place, learn just how deeply he wanted to have God's blessing and allow himself to be transformed so completely that he would never be Jacob again.

Jesus led his disciples into a wrestling match that paired them against the realities of human scarcity and God's abundance. They were called to face their dependence on self along with their difficulty in trusting that which they could not see. Those who have oft heard this story hear of the miracle, yet imagine what it might have felt like for those being told "you feed them" who didn't know the rest of the story. Imagine how often God invites us to be a part of sharing God's abundance and because we do not wrestle with the restrictions we impose, the invitation goes unheeded.

Confirmation is an oft used word in Christian churches. Many have experienced it, yet no two confirmation experiences are the same. Confirmation is membership preparation for young adults. In the United Methodist church pastors are tasked with inviting those "at the age of reason" the age when they are able to make well thought out decisions on their own, to meet for the purpose of teaching and challenging them to make their own decision regarding faith and church membership. For me, it is a call to allow and encourage these young people to wrestle, to wrestle with what they have heard and what they question; to wrestle with the vows which are asked of all seeking

membership in the church. These are the preliminary matches, for more importantly they are encouraged to wrestle with the desire to know and the mystery of God. Matches are set between what they say they believe and how they live, now and into the future. Our confirmands today, as always have learned a little, gained a lot of awareness of how little they know, and been invited to see their faith journeys not as gentle hikes but as going forward through grappling with all they encounter in light of their belief in God.

Communion also has an aspect of preparing us to wrestle. At the table we are reminded that our remembering, our thinking and accepting of that which is beyond us, allows us to be fed. At the table we face the reality of simple fare as all that is needed. At the table we are called to grapple with our tendency to want to earn a place at the table and to see the seating space as limited. How Godlike it is that these aspects of our worship have come together and call us today to enlarge our understanding of wrestling with and in our faith. We indeed need to be reminded that the tussling and tugging of the world is not the same as grappling with all we experience in the light of being the beloved children of God.

How powerful it is to be reminded that whatever we do, we do in Christ's name and we can only do so faithfully when we are willing to wrestle ourselves free. The stories they guide us, the bread it sustains us, the vows they shape us, into the wrestlers we were created to be.