I’m not really sure where to start on today’s lesson from the Old Testament because it’s a little odd (and if you want to learn more about odd things in the Old Testament come to Sunday School today). If you remember the main action that occurred was that Jacob and God had a wrestling match – the “Bomb Shell in Peniel” as Mean Gene Okerlund would later call it. I assume the wrestling was more of the Greco-Roman style variety and did not involve folding chairs or the Saskatchewan Spinning Nerve Hold. But however it went down it is a little hard to figure out what we are to take from it. The basics are that Jacob wrestled with God and it seems that for most of the time it was a pretty even match or at least it was up to the point where God knocks Jacob’s hip out of joint. From the equality of this match it would seem safe to infer that, like would later happen in the incarnation, God accepted limits to his power in order to interact with humanity. It’s one thing to understand God becoming human to save humanity but it is another thing to try and understand God becoming human in order to wrestle (or rassle if you are from Missouri) until daybreak. Are we to take from this that we have an adversarial relationship with God or to always protect our hips when praying?

Well if we only looked at the first half of the reading we might, but the story ends on a different note, although this note is still slightly ambiguous. It reads, “Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’" God in giving Jacob the new name of Israel and in blessing him seems to, at a bare minimum, giving tacit approval to the night’s happenings. So are we to take from this that if we ever get in a wrestling match with God we should try really hard and if we are still wrestling in the morning God will be happy with us and maybe even give us his blessing? Possibly, but I think it might be best for a minute to step back a little from the literalness of the wrestling match and ask what does the image of struggling with God and for that matter with our fellow humanity mean? Well, to take away the suspense let me give you the summary of what I think it is telling us and then over the next several minutes try to explain my reasoning. In my mind there are two ways to go through life. The first is the safe way where we take our opinions and even our identity in prepackaged forms. The second is to try and understand things for what they really are – to wrestle with reality both outside and inside of us and it is this second interpretation that the text is encouraging.

To better understand let’s start with the first way we can go through life, which I dubbed the safe way. The Irish poet, author, priest, and Hegelian philosopher John O’Donohue put it this way. He said, “One of the sad things today is that so many people are frightened by the wonder of their own presence. They are dying to tie themselves into a system, a role, or to an image, or to a predetermined identity that other people have actually settled on for them. This identity may be totally at variance with the wild energies that are rising inside in their souls. Many of us get very afraid and we eventually compromise. We settle for something that is safe, rather than engaging the danger and the wildness that is in our own hearts.” What this tells us in terms of today’s lesson is that people who take the safe route are the ones who are afraid to wrestle. They define themselves and the world around them in prepackaged ways that may or may not reflect reality and they do this because it is safe and easy. This is a dumb story but I think it may help illustrate my point. When Amy and I were in college we had a friend who was very competitive about what we did on the weekend. I guess it is sort of a niche market in the world of competition. So every time she asked what we did over the weekend, no matter how interesting or exciting it might have been, her response was always the same. She would say, “So you just kind of hung out.” We could have said that we spent the weekend on the Sultan of Brunei’s yacht partying with Don Rickles and Idi Amin while feasting on cheetah meat and condor egg omelets and she would say, “So you just kind of hung out.” I assume it was her way of winning the weekend activity wars because if we were simply hanging out it was very easy for her to have done something more exciting. She did not have to be challenged and she could continue living with the view that her life was the stuff of tabloid headlines while ours was akin to a program that they might have at a retirement home. No wrestling was needed. No matter what reality was she had a prepackaged box in which to file it. That writ large is the safe way to go through life, to take a few preconceived notions and to shoehorn all of reality into those preconceived notions.

Now let’s talk about the life where we wrestle with one another and with God. And before I go on let me say again that this is not literal and also that it does not involve animosity. We are not wrestling to bend someone to our will but rather to understand. The God we worship is infinite, all powerful and all knowing. This is something which most Christians tend to admit. But strangely while holding such an understanding of God many Christians think that they have God all figured out. I think part of this may be the fact that many people as they grow older never seek to expand their understanding of God, but rather are happy to retain a simple and easy childish faith. But if God is who we claim he is we cannot shoehorn his vastness into a simple understanding. No. we will never understand all of God, but we can understand more of God than we did yesterday. We need to be willing to wrestle to try and understand and deepen our relationship with God. There are certainly things we do not comprehend and may never, this side of heaven, but we cannot stop striving. Think about someone you have known for a very long time. Perhaps this is a spouse or an old friend. Now think how your understanding of them has changed with time. To deepen your relationship you have probably gone through struggles and fights as well as times of unbridled joy. You know them better because you were willing to stick around, to not put them into a box but rather to try and see where it all leads. To see them as they actually are. The depth of our relationship with others comes only in the wrestling.

And so why should this not apply to God? Sometimes we will not understand, sometimes we may be angry, but we can never give up the struggle. We are called in our walk on this earth to draw closer to God and this cannot be done passively or simply but can only be done by taking the time and the energy to grow towards God. As Fredrick Douglass tells us, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” May we struggle and progress this day and forevermore.