

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
September 6, 2020
Spiritual Ponderings
Wrestling w/ God

During our time of social isolation, when we were not allowed to celebrate Mass publicly, I ordered a book from Amazon titled "Wrestling with God: Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to Be Human." The book was written by Father Ronald Rolheiser. While I have read and enjoyed other books written by Fr. Rolheiser, it was the title of this book that made me click "buy."

I have always been interested in the following passage from the book of Genesis.

That night, however, Jacob arose, took his two wives, with the two maidservants and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he got them and brought them across the wadi and brought over what belonged to him, Jacob was left there alone. Then a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that Jacob's socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him. The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed." Jacob then asked him, "Please tell me your name." He answered, "Why do you ask for my name?" With that, he blessed him. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared." At sunrise, as he left Peniel, Jacob limped along because of his hip. That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the sciatic muscle that is on the hip socket, because he had struck Jacob's hip socket at the sciatic muscle. (Genesis 32:23-33).

Jacob finds himself at a very critical moment in his life. He is about to enter into the Promise Land, the land that was promised to his grandfather Abraham, for the first time since he left his family in order to escape his brother Esau's wrath. Jacob had stolen his brother's birth right and fatherly blessing with the help of his mother Rebecca (Genesis 27). Jacob is very aware that his past is about to catch up with him. Just before the above passage Jacob sent emissaries to his older brothers bearing gifts and loving words. (Genesis 32:4).

At the same time Jacob's future looks very bright. The God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, has blest Jacob beyond anything he can imagine. Thanks to God's blessings, Jacob was able to leave the employment of his cousin Laban with a large family and countless numbers of possessions. Jacob therefore has every reason to believe that good things will keep coming his way.

It appears that at this moment Jacob is so overwhelmed with all that is going on in his life that he just needs a moment to himself and with that in mind he sends his family and all his possessions across the river ahead of him and he prepares to spend the night alone. Surprisingly Jacob's time alone is anything but restful. Instead Jacob finds himself with a strange individual who seems to have appeared out of nowhere. The author of Genesis does not make it clear if the "man" that Jacob was wrestling was an angel or God, himself. I believe that the author does this in order protect God's mysteriousness and almightiness in his inspired story.

A person might ask how God could "not prevail over Jacob" (v. 26) for after all God is God and Jacob is just a mere mortal man. I have been blest to watch my brother wrestle with his son when his son was around three-years-old. In the midst of the wrestling match between father and son it was obvious that my brother could easily pin his son at any time but it was also obvious that there was some unspoken bonding going on between father and son. Son was enjoying the quality time with his father and father was enjoying the giggles and smiles coming forth from his son.

I like thinking of God with this image in mine. I see God playful wrestling with each of us as we struggle to figure out what it means to be in relationship with this Divine Being that is pure love. In the midst of the ups and downs of our relationships there is an incredible bonding between God and His beloved creatures.

As morning dawn Jacob demand a blessing from this mysterious God/creature and the blessing Jacob receives is a very insightful one. Jacob's blessing comes in the form of a name change. He will no longer be known as "Jacob" which

literally meant “heel grabber or usurper” (Genesis 25:26). From now on Jacob shall be known as Israel. The name “Israel” literally means “he who wrestles with God.” Jacob is now Israel: “he who wrestles with being in relationship with God.” Jacob’s twelve sons and their descendants will become the nation of Israel: the nation that wrestles with being in relationship with God. Finally, we believe that the Catholic Church is the “New Israel” built on the foundation of the Apostles and thus we are the people who wrestle with being in a relationship with God.”

Jacob is a character in the Old Testament that I can empathize with greatly as there are times in which I feel my past, family or origin issues, bad choices, etc., are about to catch up to me and I am going to have pay the piper. At the same time, it seems like my future is full of potential and untapped possibilities. God has definitely blessed me beyond whatever I could imagine. Like Jacob there are times where I just need to sit down and distance myself from everyone and everything so that I can just be alone with my thoughts. I am however never alone for God is closer to me than my very breath and so as I sit down to pray, I feel blest beyond all measures that the God of the universe chooses to care about me as an individual.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
September 13, 2020
Spiritual Ponderings
Wrestling w/ God

Last week, I explained why I ordered and read the book: “Wrestling with God: Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to Be Human,” written by Father Ronald Rolheiser. This week I would like to share some reflections from the book. Quotes from the book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

The same holds true for good spirituality. It needs to take seriously the complexity of the human heart... Perhaps the most popular spiritual writer in the last half century has been Henri Nouwen, and the great gift of his writings is that they introduce us to the complexity of our own lives and gives us permission to understand that such complexity is normal. We aren’t necessarily over-greedy, over-sexed, or over-restless. We are normal, complicated human beings walking around in human skin. That’s what real life feels like! This is also a clear truth inside the scriptures and the Gospels. The scriptures are filled with stories of person finding God and helping bring about God’s kingdom, even as their own lives are often fraught with mess, confusion, frustration, betrayal, infidelity, and sin. There are no simple human beings immune to the spiritual, psychological, sexual, and relational complexities that beset us all.

In their book: *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham compare life to the game of baseball. By quoting former baseball commissioner Francis Vincent Jr. *“Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often—those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.”*

I find it truly heartbreaking when someone comes in and confesses that he or she was tempted to commit a sin. It makes me think that somehow a person can go through life without being tempted or it is somehow their fault that they are being tempted. While there are times in which we can cause temptation by putting ourselves in the near occasion of sin. Simply being tempted is not a sin in itself. Jesus was tempted but never sinned. It saddens me, because if we are beating ourselves up for being tempted than most likely the devil has already won. Instead we should expect to be tempted and develop plans to turn those moments of temptation into moments of virtue. For example, a man being tempted by lust, can beat himself up for being tempted and most likely give into the temptation or he can develop a plan to combat lust. For example, he might decide to go for a run, pray a rosary, leave the situation or something else and thus turn the temptation into a victory for virtue. St. Ignatius of Loyola describe the devil as an enemy warlord or general who is constantly attacking us at our weakest point. St. Ignatius counsels us to therefore keep fortifying our selves against these attacks.

An awareness and an acceptance of the pathological complexity of our own lives can be the place where we finally find the threads of empathy and forgiveness: Life is difficult for everybody. Everyone is hurting. We don’t need to

blame anyone. We are all beset with the same issues. Understanding and accepting that truth can help us to forgive each other—and then forgive ourselves.

There was a time in my life where I used to take things more personally and I allowed people to wound me deeper than I should have. At those times, I see now it was because I assumed that I was the only broken person and everyone else had their act together. Looking back now, I can see most of the time people hurt me was done out of neglect (they were unaware that they had hurt me) or with a view of them protecting themselves out of fear and some did it because this was the modelled to them by the adults in their life.

At the same time, I have learned that working on my issues has made me a better friend, sibling, child, and hopefully priest. Growing to learn how to battle with the temptation for self-hate has allowed me to be more approachable. Realizing that my strengths (smart, organize, loyal) can come across as negatives (know-it-all, control-freak, follower) has allowed me to become a better leader.

In essence the soul is two things: it's the fire inside us giving us life and energy, and it's the glue that holds us together.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

September 20, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Wrestling w/ God

This month, I explaining some insights that I have gained from reading: "Wrestling with God: Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to Be Human," written by Father Ronald Rolheiser. This week I would like to share some reflections from the book. Quotes from the book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

And so a healthy spirituality needs to honor both the senses and the spirit. The ordinary pleasures of life can be deep or shallow, more mystical or more mammal, depends upon how much we honor what's spirit and what's angel within us. Conversely, our spirituality and our prayer lives can be real or more of a fantasy, depending upon how much we incarnate them in what's sensual and what's mammal within us.

I truly believe that we human beings learn through our senses. I know that there are other philosophers and thinkers out there that have other ideas, but they have not convinced me to move away from how St. Thomas talked about human learning. The Catholic liturgy speaks to us through the five senses to unveil the veiled mysteries that our senses cannot comprehend. In the same way, I need to make my love for others tangible. For example, I can say that I love my mother, but if I do not take time to spend time with her. It is a lie. I may say that I have a love for the poor but if I do not do something to help them then I have proven that I do not.

For everyone who is emotionally healthy and honest, there will be a lifelong tension between the seductive attractions of this world and the lure of God.

In their book: *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham speak of Spirituality in the following terms: *According to the way of life that flows from this insight, it is only by ceasing to play God, by coming to terms with errors and shortcomings, and by accepting the inability to control every aspect of their lives that alcoholics (or any human beings) can find the peace and serenity that alcohol (or other drugs, or sex, money material possessions, power or privilege) promise but never deliver.*

My major choices in life incarnate and radiate a great tension, because I've tried to be true to a double primordial branding inside me, the pagan and the divine.

A priest friend from another diocese was once asked when he decided to become a priest. I remember thinking his answer sounded very insightful, when he responded "this morning." Each morning he had to make the choice to be a priest of God or go do something else. It was a little bit of shock when a few years later, he told me that he decided not to be a priest anymore. He had slowly stopped living out his faith and this led to bad decisions resulting in him meeting a woman and deciding to marry her. I believe that I have learned from his story because I work hard to develop good relationship with others and this made real through my actually sitting down to pray.

Another person that I knew used to be found of telling the joke about the guy who prayed in the back of Church asking God to help win the lottery. Week after week the man comes in and finally God gets annoyed and responds "at least meet me halfway and buy a lottery ticket." God desires to help us grow but we need to work with Him and make the changes that he calls us to make.

We can deal with almost everything except fear...Fear can render us impotent. But naming it properly, recognizing where that symptom belongs and how powerless it leaves us, can help us to live with it, without sadness, and anger.

Fear is the absence of trust. I sometimes wonder if the first sin was not disobedience (eating the apple) but rather the first sin was not trusting in God. God had given Adam and Eve everything that they could want but Adam and Eve still feared that God did not love them when questioned by the devil. If they had trusted God even though they did not understand the reasons for His rules, then sin would not have entered the world. How often do we sin against people because we fear that they may harm us or take something we value away from us? Herod had John the Baptist killed because he was AFRAID of the crowd, he was AFRAID of his wife, He was AFRAID of ruining his reputation. Pilate had Jesus killed because he was AFRAID of the crowd and he was AFRAID of the Roman Emperor.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

September 27, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Wrestling w/ God

This month, I explaining some insights that I have gained from reading: "Wrestling with God: Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to Be Human," written by Father Ronald Rolheiser. This week I would like to share some reflections from the book. Quotes from the book will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

But we must trust that God understands our humanity; God doesn't demand that we give him our conscious attention all of the time. God accepts the natural wanderings of our hearts. God accepts our tiredness and fatigue. God accepts our need for distraction and escape. God accepts that we usually find it easier to immerse ourselves in entertainment than to pray. And God even accepts our resistance to him and our need to assert, with pride, our own independence. Like a loving mother embracing a child who's kicking and screaming but needs to be picked up and held, God can handle our anger, self-pity, and resistance. God understands our humanity, but we struggle to understand what it means to be human before God.

On the cross Jesus forgave us "Forgive them Father for they do not know what they are doing." When Jesus was raised from the dead, He spoke words of peace and not of revenge to His disciples. I sometimes wonder why we think God can be so easily offended. I have also had people who believed in me enough to see my potential and I think God if He is a loving God (and I believe that He is) would focus more on helping us reach our potential than focusing on our failures.

Hell is never a nasty surprise waiting for a basically happy person. Hell can only be the full flowering of a pride and selfishness that have, through a long time, twisted a heart so thoroughly that it considers happiness as unhappiness and has an arrogant disdain for happy people. If you are essentially warm of heart this side of eternity, you need not fear that a nasty surprise awaits you on the other side because somewhere along the line, unknowingly, you missed the boat and your life went terrible wrong.

The following quote from a Msgr. Pope that someone sent me, always come to mind when I think about Hell.

"Respect." God has made us free and respects our freedom to chose his Kingdom or not. Now the Kingdom of God is not a mere abstraction. It has some very specific values and these values are realized and experienced perfectly in heaven. The values of the Kingdom of God include: Love, kindness, forgiveness, justice to the poor, generosity, humility, mercy, chastity, love of Scripture, love of the truth, worship of God, God at the center and so forth. Now the fact is that there are many people in our world who do not want a thing to do with chastity, or forgiveness, or being generous and so forth. And God will not force them to adopt and live these values. While it is true that everyone may want to go to heaven, heaven is not merely what we want, it is what it is, as God has set it forth. Heaven is the Kingdom of God and the values thereof in all their fullness. Hence there are some (many?) who live in such a way that they consistently demonstrate that they are not interested in heaven, since they are not interested in one or many of the Kingdom values. Hell "has to be"

since God respects their freedom to live in this way. Since they demonstrate they do not want heaven, God respects their freedom to choose "other arrangements." - Msgr. Charles Pope of the Diocese of Washington D.C.

We harbor too many unconscious fears of God: Fear that God is not as understanding and compassionate as we are. Fear that God is not as big hearted as we are (or fear that God may be as small-hearted as we are). Fear that God does not read the heart and cannot tell the difference between wound and coldness, immaturity and sin. Fear that God gives us only one chance and cannot bear any missteps and infidelities. Fear that God doesn't respect our humanity, that God created us in one way but wants us to live in another way in order to be saved. Fear the God is threatened by our achievement, like a petty tyrant. Fear that God is threatened by our doubts and questions, like an insecure leader. Fear that God cannot stand up to the intellectual and cultural scrutiny of our world but somehow needs to be segregated and protected like an over-pious novice. Fear that God is less interested in our lives that we are and less solicitous for our salvation and that of our loved ones than we are. And, not least, fear that God is as helpless before our moral helplessness as we are. But that is not God we believe in.

The above quote, I believe makes a great examination of conscience. I find God to be the type of friend who I can treat horrible and He will stand there and take it. He will also be waiting for us to return so that He can forgive us. Think of the story of the Prodigal Son.