

It Begins with Contact  
Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

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Jesus tries slipping away by himself to a deserted place. But the crowd insists on following him. Who is this crowd? Obviously, they are not the hardcore, committed disciples. Instead, they seem to be people who know Jesus enough, or are curious enough, to want to follow him for the day. And so they do.

Jesus has compassion for them and heals them. At supper time, the disciples scrounge up some food, Jesus blesses and breaks it, and the crowd is fed. What a marvelous ending to the day!

I wonder how many of them, after they had finished eating, said something like, 'OK! I'm good! I'm cured. I'm full. Better head home before it gets dark.'

After they got home, how many of them promptly proceeded to forgot all about it? Life is busy, lots to do. In a while it just slipped their mind.

How many of them remembered, and enjoyed hanging out and listening to Jesus whenever he passed through, but never got around to actually following him?

At least a few, I'm sure, must have been enthralled by Jesus, by what he said and what he did. They must have been spellbound and started following Jesus immediately.

If they did, I'm sure they were soon wrestling with what Jesus said. It wasn't all healings and food, bread and circus so to speak. Jesus had some hard teachings. Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Pray for your enemy, do not curse but pray for your enemy. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away. Sell everything you have, everything, and follow me.

Anyone who takes God seriously, anyone who wrestles with God, soon learns more about their weaknesses than they ever wanted to know. When we wrestle with these hard teachings of Jesus we soon learn how much we love ourselves and how little we love our neighbor. We learn it's a lot easier to curse our enemy

than to pray for our enemy. When wrestling with God, we realize how much we enjoy seeing those things we shouldn't see. We learn how hard it is to let go of even a fraction of our wealth, much less sell everything and follow Jesus.

When we take God seriously, when we wrestle with Jesus' teachings, we get thrown to the mat. We're knocked out of joint. We realize our shortcomings. We get up close and personal with our weaknesses. But we are also up close and personal with God.

It's not for me to judge anyone's relationship with God. For some people, a relationship with God is one-and-done. A wedding, a funeral, a doctor's visit. They're healed, they're fed, and they never look back. OK. That's between them and God.

Others have a brief infatuation with God. They pursue God with everything they have for a little while but then the novelty wears off and they start backing away. They want to be friendly with God, but not too friendly. Lunch buddies. Facebook friends. Someone you want to know, but not up close and personal.

A few, though, are not satisfied with a distant, low-commitment relationship. These are the followers whose commitment lasts longer than a good meal. They dive in. They wrestle with God's will for their lives. They get to know God up close and personal.

And when they do, it hurts. Self-realization is always painful. But it's also a blessing because it draws us closer to God.

Friends, where are you? Where are we? Obviously, we're here and that's good, but is our heart and mind somewhere else? Is Jesus an occasional friend, a workplace friend, someone we're OK visiting for an hour or so, once or twice a month?

Or are we doing our best to know God up close and personal? Are we wrestling with God, learning about ourselves and how we can better live the blessing of being in God's presence?

Friends, this is between you and God. Go where you think best. Amen.