

The NCAA wrestling tournament is one of the options for viewing on our flight back to Connecticut. As a former wrestler, I love watching these amazing athletes and the strength, quickness, finesse, and creativity that they bring to their craft. Far from brute force, success on the mat at this level is dependent on both physical ability as well as mental dexterity and the facility to adjust to whomever the opponent may be. Along with the intrigue of such engagement, I am also drawn to the sport because, well, I grew up with it. And like many who engaged in an early activity, the sport itself is not necessarily the reason for interest. Oftentimes, the relationships between coach and athlete and the camaraderie of the team are the things that resonate and solidify the love of a sport.

Indeed, one of the more formative images that I have of wrestling never took place on the mat. As a college student, I visited my dad at a Saturday middle school tournament held nearby the college I attended. He coached a ragtag group of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. While six mats were kept active throughout the morning and afternoon to move the competitors through their respective brackets, the major action I witnessed took place off the mat. At one point, I could see my dad encouraging a young boy following his match. The boy was probably 90 pounds soaking wet. He clearly reveled in the attention. At one point, he seemed to move closer, lifting his head just so under my dad's arm to receive a side-by-side hug. It was nothing, perhaps. A fleeting moment. However, I could sense his desire for approval in the simple encounter between coach and athlete, and, what's more, a connection.

Which, when you stop and think about it, is nothing new. We all seek approval. We all want acceptance. We all need the type of connection that sometimes comes from other figures beyond our immediate family. I write this in the aftermath of the heinous killings at the mosque in Christ Church, New Zealand. I write fully aware of the psychological profile of the killer and others with violent outbursts. Narcissistic. Self-Absorbed. Delusional. I also am tragically aware that while such an encounter as the young wrestler in my vignette may not save such an individual, it may go a long way to preventing such acts of violence born out of a place of utter rejection and futility. Indeed, the profile of the killer and others like him is that they never received the love that they (and we) so desperately needed.

While the threat of such violence seems to expand on an almost daily basis, I do believe that such simple acts like my father connecting with a random young boy can help shape the psychological well-being of so many who crave attention, approval, and love. Unfortunately, our society does not do well, particularly with boys, in creating cultures that allow for vulnerability, openness, and acceptance outside a rigidly prescribed sense of masculinity that is unfortunately rooted in physicality, dominance, and force. I am the product of a culture in rural Minnesota that—knowingly or unknowingly—fostered such a view of masculinity. I am fortunate that I found many models to the contrary that seemed more sensible, kind, and generous and offered a great deal more opportunity to be who one truly is.

However, I never forget the environment in which I was raised and the predominating narrative for young boys. It goes without saying that another—or other—narratives are needed. Ironically, the very same global connector that is the internet, which allows for the echo chamber to fuel extremists and supremacists, also provides sanctuary to many young people who struggle with their own identity and the desire and need for connection. These cyber oases allow for some young people to see and realize that there are other narratives, counter narratives, narratives that allow for one to be who he or she truly is.

And, when it all is said and done, that is really what our journey in life is all about: living into who we are. There certainly are any number of road blocks along the way. There are countless expressions that add to the inequity that sometimes seems inevitable within our culture. And, yet, there are those serendipitous moments where we bump into another human who sees us for who we are, accepts us for who we are, and even loves us. It may be naïve, but this seems to me to be the recipe that we need to seek to create and recreate daily and a zillion times over so that a young boy in northern Minnesota might know that he is loved, a psychopath in New Zealand might be swayed before falling off the deep end, and any number of others may fall into grace rather than fall out into negligence and pain. The church has a profound voice in all of this. Rather than the judgmental institution that some caricature it as, the church is rooted in this very concept. God loving each and every person and longing for us to be who we are. As an incarnational tradition, the issue is that *we* are the ones who embody that to others. God's hands in the world.