

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
August 6, 2017

“Our Lonely Vigils”
“... Jacob was left alone ...”
Genesis 32:24

PRELUDE

Simple message this morning:
don't let go.

We, who are committed to the
“patient rule of Jesus Christ”
(Plymouth Church Covenant)
don't let go the faith and hope
that is ours to impart
to the world.

Don't let go the vision of God's love
so permeating our hearts and minds
that the kin-dom comes
and God's will is done, on earth as it
is in heaven.

Don't let go the Christian priority,
grounded in the preaching and teaching of Jesus,
to seek first the kin-dom of God
and God's righteous,
to attain the life that aligns with
God's design and promise.

Though the journey is perilous,
filled with trials and snares,
harrowing twists and arduous challenges,
indeed, life experience we don't expect,
and death episodes we cannot escape,
don't let go. Hold on to that which is good
(I Thessalonians 5:21).

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We heard in our scripture lesson this morning one of the great passages that exists in all the Bible. Such a strange story - permitting varying degrees of interpretation. One verse speaks volumes:

“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Who is this unnamed, nighttime visitor?
This unknown adversary?

A man, as indicated in the text?

An angel, as it is often depicted
by the artists?

Is this a meeting between
Creator and creature,
between Maker and a striving,
struggling human?

Walter Brueggemann offer us this description:
**“... it is an ominous encounter (for Jacob)
with an unnamed opponent possessing
divine qualities”** (Brueggemann, p. 266).

Indeed, the place of this encounter
was given a name. Jacob called it Peniel, saying,
**“I have seen God face to face,
and yet my life is preserved.”**

One verse describes an ordeal that
took place over the course of a night.

And how curious -
there is no clear-cut
winner or loser,
no undisputed conquering hero.

The unnamed, this man - angel -
an unAlmighty -
but still inscrutable Deity -
does not best Jacob (Genesis 32:25).

They are locked together, these two,
Jacob and this ominous "Other,"
and Jacob will not let go,
not without obtaining a blessing.

The "Other" has power - power to strike,
to wound and handicap Jacob.
This "Other" has blessing to give,
the blessing of favor that will
redefine and reconstitute Jacob's life.

The blessing that comes
is signified with a new name.
**"You shall no longer be called Jacob,
but Israel ("the one who strives with God"),
for you have striven with God and humans,
and you have prevailed"** (Genesis 32:28).

The blessing came as
a result of the wrestling.
The wrestling is where
the blessing begins.

This story often stands alone,
sectioned out from its larger context.
The larger context is important.
Let me try - briefly - to round it out a bit.

Jacob, you may recall,
due to family strife, was basically exiled
from the house of his birth.

Sent off to his mother's (Rebekah) people,
in another land, where he found
welcome and wives in the home of
Laban, his uncle.

He was twenty years in the land of Laban;
he started with nothing; and over time,
he gained much. He grew to be prosperous,
a man of great wealth.

But then he had a dream – it runs in the family!
In a dream Jacob heard an angel speak:

**“I am the God of Bethel,
where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.
Now leave this land at once and return
to the land of your birth”**

(Bethel was the place where Jacob had another
dream [Genesis 28:12] in which he saw the ladder
of which we sometimes sing: the link between
heaven and earth with angels ascending/descending).

So Jacob is under orders:
to make a break with his present
to reconcile with his past,
to advance into the future
where God is calling him.

This is where we encounter
no small amount of drama.
For the only past Jacob knows
involves Esau, the brother who
when last seen was thinking lethal thoughts,
wanting little more than to kill Jacob.

Twenty years. Jacob has accumulated vast herds
of oxen, donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats; he
has vast holdings. On top of the world.

But he can't shake the past.
Facing the past is what he has come to fear,
and that fear is what is stalling his future.
It is a great fear – a paralyzing fear –
and it accounts for the intensity of his wrestling.
He fears for his life if he advances
to where God is calling.

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With whom, with what are we wrestling?
Are we striving, are we wrestling,
with the future God is willing for our good?

JACOB WRESTLES WITH HIS SENSE OF WORTHINESS

As Jacob heads home he offers a prayer.
It is an interesting prayer – for it is the only
extended prayer we have in the book of Genesis
(Genesis 32:9-12 –see Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 263).

Three verses:

- (1) O God of my ancestors, I am here because you bid me.
- (2) **“I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness you have shown me ...”**
- (3) deliver me, my wives, my children, all in my care, from those who intend us harm
- (4) you've promised me good – and I'm holding you to it.

A **“primal theme”** of biblical faith:
God has a preference for the underdog.

God has cast divine concern with the **“little ones”**
who face off against the strong of the world.
In Jacob's prayer – v. 10 – Jacob defers,
he confesses unworthiness to be included among
the **“least”**... he asserts: **“I am smaller”**
(see W. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 264).

Matthew 10:42: “cup of water to one of these little ones ...
none will lose their reward ...”

Matthew 18:6-14: beware being a “stumbling block before one of
these little ones ...” Woe to the world ...

Gideon – Judges 6:15-18: Gideon – “I am the least in my family ...
The Lord said: “I will be with you ...”

David – I Samuel 16:11: the youngest of Jesse’s boys ...

Amos – 7:2, 5: Jacob is “**so little**,” “**so small**” (NRSV); yet Jacob
strives, Jacob persists; and Jacob survives thrives,
because of God

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**JACOB WRESTLES – WITH THE SUMMONS TO GO BACK,
TO RETURN HOME, TO FACE THE ISSUES THAT
CAUSED HIS FLIGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE**

As Jacob strives to advance in response to the summons of
God – so also should we. We need wrestle with being
witnesses for justice and peace, with being a people who
are as sincere and honest as we can be as a community
of God’s people.

Earlier this summer, I had conversation with a physician,
asking me about how I was faring in this great age of
polarization. This person was assuming – that to survive,
the best strategy is to avoid talking about questions that
could spark debate and bring division in the house where
love, unity, charity, are expected to prevail.

Church background of this particular person –
father-in-law a lifelong United Methodist minister;
by church affiliation a practicing Presbyterian.

Not lacking in church experience; but not savvy

with regard to gospel implications and progressive faith affirmations.

So I explained a bit about how we identify - and worked through the litany of being ONA, Earthwise, Global mission and Just Peace. In explaining "Just Peace," I referenced that it is tied to traditional church teaching on "Just War," and that to understand the former, you need understand the latter.

So I asked: are you familiar with this?
He paused, and then said: "No, not really.
When going to church I most often consider the
music program."

It dawned on me - there was virtually no comprehension of any substance in this conversation, for lack of awareness.

Just war - simply stated - addresses the question -
What are the conditions under which a Christian
gets a blessing from the church to potentially
murder and maim an adversary?
We opt for "just peace" to avoid "just war,"
which is irrelevant in an age capable
of mass destruction.

No simple answers. So wrestling is required
that we avoid simplistic answers - that we not
concede to the appeal of "authoritarian figures"
who are more concerned with power
and its preservation
than with principle
and its practice.

Wrestling with how we forge peace.
Wrestling with how we pray for it;
how we expend for it; how we maintain
some measure of integrity in our quest
to demonstrate fidelity to the Jesus way.

I'm concerned Christians, who should know better, are not wrestling with the things that make for peace.

Marian Wright Edelman, in a recent newsletter (Children's Defense Fund), wrote that "71% of 17-24-year-olds are ineligible for military service because of health and educational deficits." If this assessment is anywhere close to accurate, it is a stunning example of generational and societal failure to defend and protect the commonwealth.

Combine this with the bully pronouncement issued by our Vice-President - the "**era of strategic patience**" is over. I didn't know we were ever in an era of strategic patience, but it sounds appealing to me - forestall and prevent the perils of being impatient! (Pence quote, April 16, 2017, visiting the DMZ, Korea).

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CONCLUSION

Let me close with this ...
A poem by Jan Richardson.

Jacob's Blessing

If this blessing were easy,
anyone could claim it.
As it is,
I am here to tell you
that it will take some work.

This is the blessing
that visits you
in the struggling,

in the wrestling,
in the striving.

This is the blessing
that comes
after you have left
everything behind,
after you have stepped out,
after you have crossed
into that realm
beyond every landmark
you have known.

This is the blessing
that takes all night
to find.

It's not that this blessing
is so difficult,
as if it were not filled
with grace
or with the love
that lives
in every line.

It's simply that
it requires you
to want it,
to ask for it,
to place yourself
in its path.
It demands that you
stand to meet it
when it arrives,
that you stretch yourself
in ways you didn't know
you could move,
that you agree
to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,
borne in the hands
of the difficult angel
who has chosen you,
do not let go.
Give yourself
into its grip.

It will wound you,
but I tell you
there will come a day
when what felt to you
like limping

was something more
like dancing
as you moved into
the cadence
of your new
and blessed name.

—Jan Richardson
from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*

The wrestling is where
 the blessing begins.
So hold on. Don't let go the God
 who comes to bless, to feed
 to fulfill, to inspire
 goodness and mercy.
Don't let go the love of Jesus -
 the love leads to the peace of God,
a peace in you, with you, for you,
a peace the world can't give and
 and the world can take away.
Don't let go. For in the end,
the love and peace will prevail.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*