

Sample Sermon

Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ
Annual Meeting Weekend—June 14, 2015

Genesis 32: 22-32

(Written by Rev. Ashley Harness - adapted by the worship planning team.)

[Begin in prayer—use one of your own, or share this one: *Gracious God, give us to wrestle with You enough that we are marked—with blessing, with your Love. Give us to wrestle with you enough that we can face into the truth about our lives and choose to be re-named, again and again, by You.*]

[Begin with your own introduction and explanation, or say this:

This morning, as we worship here in this place, our friends in the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ and our [pastor, fellow congregants _____, _____] are gathered in St. Joseph for Annual Meeting. Even though we are separated by distance, we are together in spirit. One way we are manifesting that connection is that we are using a sermon that is being preached across the Conference this morning. It is based on a Scripture that has been used at Annual Meeting as well.

These words are not mine, they were written by Rev. Ashley Harness of Lyndale UCC in Minneapolis. I share them in the spirit of connection with our UCC kindred and pray I will speak her words and God's Word with integrity.]

This scripture of the story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel is one of the most beautiful and rich stories of our tradition. Because of this, it's also a little daunting to preach on – it is so famous, and so beloved, that it feels almost off limits.

But if we take some time to study what others, especially well-respected theologians, have said about it in the past we might notice some themes that emerge. We could categorize them this way:

- A) Theological sports commentary: This is a strain of analysis focused on the tactical blow-by-blow and obsessed with the question of *who won the wrestling match*. And
- B) What we might call the “*scientific classification of God* and divine figures” debate: Is this mysterious figure who Jacob meets an Angel? A demon? A “man with divine attributes”? That’s what one commentary called it, as though making some kind of scientific point about levels of God-concentrate in this figure. Finally

- C) The, “*is it supposed to be real,*” line of questions: Is this a dream sequence, an analogy for Jacob’s psychological wrestling, or supposedly a real encounter in the physical world?

Though these lines of questioning are interesting, they may not offer us very much to really take home with us. The last one, though, does remind me of one of my favorite lines from the Harry Potter series. When Harry’s soul lingers in the space between death and life after he has faced Voldemort in the last book, he meets the spirit of Dumbledore. Harry asks Dumbledore if the conversation they are having is real or if it’s all happening in his head. Dumbledore responds, “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” For me, that answers that line of questioning quite well.

As for the other two themes – theological sports commentary and scientific classification of God – those may reveal more about these particular theologian’s anxieties around power – both human and Divine - than about what the text really has to tell us about the relational encounter at the core of this story – *the blessing*. They seem more focused on making sense out of the story than on finding meaning in it.

Looking further among some of the more recent, though still powerful meaning makers of our time, we can find another theme: God’s power is not about control (something we can measure by who wins). God’s power is the power of “persistent love.” Not saccharine, glossy Hallmark love. As Catherine Keller describes it, this love is “an unconditional radiance that embraces neighbor, stranger, or even enemy.” It lures us to notice our interdependence and implicates [us]... in the lives of others.¹ This is the Divine Power of Love that I think Jacob encounters in our story for today.

Let’s back up just a moment to remember Jacob’s context here. First, remember Jacob is not exactly Mr. Righteous. He stole his brother Esau’s birthright and blessing from their father, big deals in ancient times. This is kind of like finagling a way to steal your brother’s college fund and inheritance and future prospects for security and status in the world all at once. Not cute. Esau is furious. So Jacob’s mother sends Jacob to live with an uncle to avoid Esau’s rage and revenge.

¹ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery*, 113.

Over the next 20 years, Jacob grows up. He turns his childhood trickster skills into adult workplace strengths, so to speak. He's prosperous, as his two wives, two maids, and eleven children are meant to show us. So of course, this is when God decides it's time for Jacob to go back to his homeland and face his past. On this journey, he will have to pass through the land where his estranged brother Esau lives, girded by wealth and an army. And he's terrified about being rejected. I don't mean emotionally rejected here. He's afraid Esau's people might kill him before he can even talk to Esau. The night before he will pass through Esau's land is when we meet Jacob in our text for today.

I want to pause and point something out about this story. In order for Jacob to become the person, the leader, he is supposed to be, God sends him back to his homeland to face his past. God sends him back to the place where he cheated and lied and stole. He had to make it right before he could go forward. And in order to be ready to make it right, he had to wrestle mightily.

What in your own past, or your family's, are you being called to turn around and face into? How is God calling this community to engage the truth about who we've been?

Let's read the story again, with this context and with our own lives as background. But this time with a bit different translation of a few words and a new theological lens inflected by my reading and praying:

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and the force of Love (capital L) wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When this glimmer of Love incarnate saw that Jacob could endure its presence, Love grew, persisting to reach Jacob where he was most vulnerable. ²⁶Then the power of Love's embrace had done its work and said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' ²⁷So Love paused and said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob, the one whose name means he grasps for what is not his.'²⁸ Love responded, 'Now you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, the name for one who strives with Love and endures.'²⁹ Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me *your* name.' And Love said, 'Why is it that you try to grasp me *still*?' And there Love blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel which means 'face of Love' saying, 'For I have seen Love face to face, and endured.'³¹ The sun rose upon him as he left to meet Esau, forever moving more slowly because Love left a mark at his core.

What is wonderful about this text, both the original and this new translation, is how honest it is about *real life blessings*. Jacob says, “For I have seen Love (or God) face to face, and endured.” While we can imagine Jacob awestruck and joyous, that word “endured” speaks pretty loudly. Another translation of that root word in Hebrew is “survived.” We don’t usually talk about “surviving” a blessing. But isn’t that so true sometimes? Just think about it for a moment.

I’m thinking of my grandmother, Flo. I certainly encountered the face of Love in her. But in the days around her funeral I didn’t feel like I was receiving a blessing. I didn’t have the language for it at the time, but in retrospect, *I was surviving the blessing of her life*. Radiant, real, persistent love can be as painful as it is precious. And isn’t that why we run away from encounters with Love, why we sometimes need Love to tackle us in the middle of the night and reach in for that place in us that is most vulnerable? Isn’t that why we get entangled in wrestling matches with Love, at times pulling it close, at times grasping, and at times pushing it away with all our might? But imagine, how many more blessings we might count if we could see each encounter with Love as a blessing, no matter the outcome, no matter if it is painful?

In Jacob’s case, he survives with a limp, forever marked to move more slowly. This is the opposite of what we associate with blessings. Instead of protection and health, God’s blessing here makes Jacob’s vulnerability visible. And yet, in that vulnerability he discovers a different kind of power.

When Jacob continues his journey to meet his brother, his enemy, in the next chapter of Genesis, he doesn’t go forward in attack mode or as a trickster. Even though his first glimpse of Esau is with him surrounded by 400 soldiers, Jacob steps forward to greet him all alone and bows, not once but 7 times, like a dog rolling over to show his belly. To this, Esau responds with an embrace. And Jacob says to Esau, “to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” This is the tremendous power of God’s persistent love, “an unconditional radiance that embraces neighbor, stranger, or even enemy.”

This whole story summarizes why we need church. Like those theologians we considered at the beginning of this sermon, it’s easier for us to spend time in our heads categorizing and measuring and making sense, than it is for us to let go into a moment of encounter, of blessing. Church, on the other

hand, can be a place where we practice encountering Love despite all the risk. Church, at its best, is where we learn to endure blessings. Church, if we make it so, is where we too can transform our vulnerability into the power we need to heal the world.

May we be that church, dearest [insert church name], for ourselves and for our world.

Amen.