

“What We Have Done, and What We Have Left Undone”

Genesis 32:22-31; I Corinthians 12:4-11a

**Final Sermon as pastor/associate pastor of
Kirkwood & Bethpage Presbyterian Churches**

I Corinthians 12:4-11

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, ⁵and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Genesis 32:24-31

From the Biblical category “Where in the world did that come from,” we find Jacob late one night in the midst of his long journey home, having sent his whole family and all his possessions on ahead of him. With no further introduction or explanation, we have the reading for this morning:

{24} Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. {25} When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. {26} Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." {27} So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." {28} Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." {29} Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. {30} So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." {31} The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

The Sermon

This is a time of renewal, clearing the way for leadership in one place to be transformed, and, in a different but similar place, for new leadership to arrive. It is an exciting time, marked by difficult decisions; yet, in my heart of hearts, I believe, and I think you do as well, that Matt Doherty will make an outstanding men's basketball coach for the University of North Carolina.

One way we mark the stages in our journeys of faith is by looking at the times that we have done what Jacob had to do to get to the "next stage" of his own journey: namely, to wrestle.

Sometimes we wrestle with an important, looming decision.

Sometimes we're battling the angel of the Lord at one time and the demons of temptation at another.

I have been counseling someone, far removed from these churches, as he goes through the personal hell of making a decision that will change his life and that of many others, and as always, the name of the game is clarity. At one level come the questions that must be answered: What do you want to have, and how much of it? What do you want to do? Who do you want to be?

But those questions are all subservient to the ones that give us the perspective we need, the ones which are the point of this church sending young people to career counseling every year: What does God want for you; what does God want you to do? Who does God want you to be?

I've always been intrigued by this story of Jacob's mysterious wrestling match. Mystery cloaks everything about it: in the dead of night, Jacob is alone, in the dark, in a nameless, uninhabited area.

When I was doing my Mission Volunteer service in England ten years ago, I was invited to visit some missionary friends in Edinburgh, an eight-hour bus ride north of where I was living.

One Friday night, I got one of the parishioners at my church to drop me off at the bus station, which was 20 miles from my home, in time for the midnight bus departure.

He dropped me off a little after 11:00 at night at the empty bus platform, and I told him to go on home; the bus would come to get me shortly.

By 11:30, I began to get a little uncomfortable being the only human being at the bus depot, which was out in the middle of an entirely uninhabited area.

Finally, a bus pulled up. I asked the driver if he was going to Edinburgh, and he replied that the Edinburgh bus left from a different station, but I could catch a shuttle that would take me to the right bus—if I hadn't missed it—if I walked about a mile up the empty, pitch black highway.

By myself. At night. In the dark. In a foreign country.

Walking out there, alone in that vast, silent emptiness, I remember thinking, “All right, God: you got me into this, please get me out of it!”

How many times have you been there, making that journey, whether it's your faith journey, or the journey of your life, or the journey Dr. Seuss has told millions of high school graduates about in that great book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go*. Remember?

*Congratulations! Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.ⁱ*

When I made that midnight walk through the dark English countryside toward an unclear destination along an empty highway I was 22 —still bulletproof, so I didn't know enough to be worried about some of the things that might have crossed Jacob's mind in his somewhat similar circumstances.

One of which might have been, "What if somebody just jumped out of the darkness at me..."

With no warning, and no explanation, a man emerges in the darkness, yet is never truly revealed, and Jacob and the man wrestle.

The element of surprise must have made Jacob's adrenaline kick into high gear; the animal terror of being jumped and wrestled in the complete darkness must have provided a quick burst of energy.

It doesn't say what time it was when the man came at him, so I wonder... After about half an hour, the adrenaline has worn off. After an hour of wrestling, your muscles ache, and you're sick of this ridiculous situation.

After 90 minutes, you'd almost rather the other person just win already and get it over with.

That's how it happens in the hospital, the nursing home, the home of the person who's no longer able to get out of bed, let alone get out of the house.

You get tired of wrestling.

It's also what happens with the teenager who's been just saying no in a landscape filled with all kinds of confusion and temptations and mixed signals and misleading hazards.

You get *tired* of the wrestling, tired of "just saying no." It's easy for a middle aged person to tell a teenager to just say no. A teenager knows there's no "just" about it. It's never that simple. It's a constant, ongoing wrestling match, and sometimes, you'd rather just give up than have to fight it anymore.

But that's the wrestling we do with ourselves.

*Oh, the places you'll go! There is fun to be done!
There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.
And the magical things you can do with that ball
will make you the winning-est winner of all...*

*Except when they don't.
Because sometimes, they won't.
I'm afraid that sometimes you'll play lonely games too.
Games you can't win 'cause you'll play against you.*

That's the empty darkness that Jacob is walking through. It's the darkness of a life without God, the emptiness of a journey from one successful swindle to the next, always getting away with it.

Jacob is an excellent representative of the human race: strong-willed, supremely self-interested, willing to be dishonest if it will help him get where he wants to be; able to cheat those

closest to him time and time again and, for the most part, to get away with it. The name says it all: Jacob means something like heel/trickster/overreacher, “human being” (quote-unquote) at its rawest.

Jacob proves to be a worthy opponent: for most of the night, they fight to a draw. The advantage changes hands a couple of times, and during those exchanges, words are exchanged also.

The result is that Jacob will come away from this all-night duel with a blessing, and a new name: a new identity which he will be given through his encounter with God.

The new name, Israel, has a meaning that is a little more obscure, a little more mysterious. A rough translation would be, “God preserves” or “God protects.”

At the end of the battle, as morning is about to break, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes God comes into the dark emptiness of a human life, straggling out in the middle of nowhere, not with sweetness and light, but to wrestle. God loves you enough to interfere with your life, pushing you to become something better than you are, to find your identity only after you have stayed up all night wrestling to exhaustion. Sometimes, like Jacob, we aren’t even sure who or what it is that we’re wrestling with.

And even when daylight breaks, the result is often as murky as it is profound, as mysterious as it is undeniable.

The wrestling we find ourselves doing to hold off God's assault can be awe-inspiring. Oh, the duration we've got when we really want to hold out against God's assault into our lives. The stamina, the endurance! "Wow! I didn't know I could do this!"

A few months ago I got a telephone call from the chair of the nominating committee of a Presbyterian Church at Carolina Beach. We had a cordial conversation, but I made it clear that I was happy where I was. Still, you at least take time to pray about it when something like this comes your way, and the committee chair made it clear: we are all in this process to discern God's will. He said, if at any time, either of us feels that my going there is *not* God's will, then we call off the whole idea and each goes back to where we came from, no hard feelings.

I had never had to do that before, so I went down there to meet formally with their committee so that we would all see that this was simply not to be.

I had two long meetings scheduled for the afternoon□and evening, and between them, I went for a long, long walk on the beach, during which time the fine citizens of Carolina Beach were treated to the bizarre spectacle of an overweight guy with no tan whatsoever walking along and muttering—apparently to himself—"You have got to be kidding me."

And for me, the wrestling had begun. It involves not only the question, “Am I being called to go there,” but also the question, “Am I being called to move on from here?”

This wrestling match is not faked. The classical prayer of confession reads in part, “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”

Strictly through my own prayer life, and after an awful lot of wrestling, I have come to believe that God’s plan for the future of the ministries I was called here to serve requires a new vision, and that my part of this church’s ministry, as enjoyable and happily challenging for me as it has been, has reached its conclusion.

I fought that for a long time. But I believe that in my time here, we have always tried to see that what we have done has been in accordance with God’s will, and what we have left undone, God will lead us—will lead you—to accomplish.

And if we have offended God by what we have done or what we have left undone, God will show us our error, and will renew a right spirit within us.

*Out there things can happen and frequently do
To people as brainy and footsy as you.
And when things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t stew.
Just go right along. You’ll start happening too.*

That's fine for Dr. Seuss. But as you're going right along, remember that God loves you enough to interrupt your journey and occasionally keep you up all night, wrestling.

As we move on from our encounters with God, limping our way toward home, may we all finally find our identity in Jesus.

Amen.

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Bethpage Presbyterian Church (8:30)
Kirkwood Presbyterian Church (11:00)
Kannapolis, NC
July 16, 2000

ⁱ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990).

ⁱⁱ See Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation)*.