

August 6, 2017
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“I Will Not Let You Go”

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Jacob Wrestles God

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Psalm 17:1–7, 15

¹Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
²From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.
³If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.
⁴As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent.
⁵My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.
⁶I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words.
⁷Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.
¹⁵As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

Genesis 32:22–31

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 5:21–24

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

"I Will Not Let You Go"

Psalm 17:1–7, 15; Genesis 32:22–31; Matthew 5:21–24

"To see your face is like seeing the face of God" – Genesis 33:10

Several weeks ago, Amy shared with us the story of a recurring dream that she has during times of stress. This made me think about the fact that I, too, have a recurring dream that returns with unsettling regularity, especially when there is conflict in my waking life. I am having a conversation with my mother. In the course of the conversation my mother says some hurtful things and I lash out at her. The next thing I know, we are in the midst of a violent physical altercation. That's right, me and my mom in a knock-down drag out fight. Anyone who's ever been part of a family can probably relate on some level to the feelings at the root of this dream, if not to the actions themselves. Artist India Arie has a line in one of her songs that says, "One shot to heart without breaking your skin, no one has the power to hurt you like your kin"

It's true. Sometimes the deepest emotional wounds of all are the ones we receive at the hands of those we're closest to. We see this in our own lives. We see it all over the place in Genesis through the lives of our ancestors in faith. As we've journeyed through the story of Jacob's life, we've seen it there too. Jacob has hurt a lot of people, many of them his own kin.

The one person Jacob has hurt the most is his brother Esau. Much of the prosperity and success that Jacob has experienced in his life has come at the expense of his twin brother, a man he's been playing for a fool almost since the day they were both born. He tricked Esau out of his birthright, conned him out of their father's blessing, and ran off in the dead of night leaving Esau in a murderous rage. Yes, Jacob has bred conflict in his family everywhere he has gone for his entire life. Somehow, he has always managed to evade the dire consequences of his actions – even coming out of sticky situations better off than he was before. But this story is different.

When Jacob encounters the stranger in the night, it is the first time we see him stand and face the consequences of his decisions instead of turning tail to run away, or trying to bargain his way out. At first look, this story may seem too easy, as if after years of conflict and deception, God comes in and fixes things in Jacob's life overnight. Jacob asks for a blessing, and he receives it. Again. But this scene in Genesis 32 is not the first time that Jacob has wrestled with God. In fact, throughout Jacob's story, God has been saying to Jacob, as Amy put it a few weeks ago, **"I love you just as you are, and far too much to let you stay that way"**.

Jacob says to the stranger in the night "I will not let you go." But in truth, it is God who would not let Jacob go. Throughout the dishonest and treacherous dealings of his past, God held fast to Jacob. Through all of Jacob's struggles with his family, God would not let go, and continued to struggle with Jacob right up to this moment when Jacob was at his most vulnerable. This is when God transformed Jacob in body and spirit. Jacob walked away that daybreak with a new understanding of himself, of God, and of the world around him.

We cannot struggle with God without the encounter leaving its mark on our lives. As a result of his encounter with the Divine, Jacob's conscience is awakened and the wrong he has done is made clear. God does not punish Jacob's conflictive character, but challenges it and reshapes it so that Jacob is able to live into his new name. He realizes it is time to mend the relationship that has been torn through his deception. Jacob's transformation would never be complete until he made things right with Esau. This is the message of our New Testament text today as well. Transformation is one thing. It is sacred and it is necessary if we are to live into our faith. But transformation cannot be complete if we leave the business of reconciliation with our sisters and brothers unfinished.

We come to this table today much like Jacob meeting Esau: Some of us with unfinished business, some broken and afraid, and acknowledging that we cannot run, and cannot hide. The courage to stand and face his brother was the blessing God gave to Jacob as they struggled. The courage to stand and face one another in the presence of God, with all of our brokenness is the blessing we receive as we gather around this common table, confessing all the ways that *we*

struggle. The Good News, the great news, is that Jacob encounters the blessing of forgiveness when he finally stands face to face with his brother. We encounter the miracle of God's grace when we stand face to face with our kindred in Christ and seek reconciliation. In fact, even before we get there, we have already been reconciled to God and one another through the power of Christ's love – a love that will not let us go.

So come and be reconciled. Come and be transformed. Come and be nourished for our journey together in the presence of God. Even as we sometimes struggle with God, and with one another. For God loves us too much to ever let us go.

Amen.