

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Genesis 32:22-31

October 21, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, [a] because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, [b] saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, [c] and he was limping because of his hip.

Can you imagine the sense of trepidation and dread Jacob must have felt as he waited on the other side of the Jabbok River—waited to meet his brother Esau from whom he had been estranged for so many years. For years Jacob and his family had been living away from the Promised Land, away from Esau after Esau cheated Jacob out of his birthright. But now God has commanded Jacob to return to his homeland, and Jacob knew that a return to that place would necessitate a meeting with his brother. Indeed, in the passages immediately preceding these we heard this morning, Jacob feared that Esau might kill him and his wives and his children upon their return to the Land of Canaan. To avoid this fate, Jacob sent Esau peace offerings of goats, camels, and numerous other animals. I imagine that he choose to spend that night before he met with his brother again alone because he needed to gather his wits about him because he did not know if the next day would bring reunion, confrontation, or even death. Jacob needed a good night's rest to prepare. But, as the story goes, he got no such thing. In fact, he spent his entire night in a wrestling match with a faceless man. Jacob and the man wrestled, rolling back and forth across the banks of the Jabbok stream—both soaked with sweat and covered in sandy grime. Jacob would not let the man go until he blessed him, the man would not let Jacob get the best of him and so he struck him on the hip, leaving a reminder of this wrestling match. Any time, for the rest of his life, that Jacob turned, knelt, or stood up, he would remember that night by the stream—the night on which he wrestled none other than God's own self. The night on which his wrestling with God led to a blessing from God.

Jacob presents us with a strange idea of discipleship, does he not? After all, we have songs about God walking and talking with us, telling us that we are God's own, not songs about getting down and dirty with God, wrestling with God, and having God leave a scar on us from which we'll never recover. But, it seems to me that those who end up in a down and dirty wrestling match with God are the ones who, in the end, like Jacob, receive the greatest blessing.

Take for example, Mother Teresa. Obviously, God's got an unfair advantage from the get-go, what with God being God, the Creator of the Universe and all of that and Mother Teresa—a diminutive woman, likely weighing less than 100 pounds when she was soaking wet, resident of one of the poorest cities in one of the poorest countries in the world. You'd think that God would take it easy on one such as her. And yet, as the letters from her years of missionary work in Calcutta articulate, her fifty year ministry in

the name of Jesus Christ was a never-ending wrestling match with God. I found these revelations shocking, and yet somewhat comforting.

So many times in ministry I have heard people say, “Well, I’m not Mother Teresa. I don’t have the kind of faith it takes to do the kinds of things she did.” And yet her own letters indicate that a person with very little faith is a person very much like her indeed. Listen to her own words, “If there be God – please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul, how painful is this unknown pain – I have no faith.” I’ve yet to read the new book about her life in its totality so filled with pain are her words. I read a little at a time until I can’t see the words anymore because of my tears blurring her words recorded on the page. The book presents an entirely different picture of the so often seen to be smiling, serving, seemingly joyful servant of the Lord. And though her words cause my heart to break, I recognize that her words break my heart open—open to a new recognition and reality of the joys and struggles of Christian discipleship. Quite frankly, I think the new reality of her struggles with faith are so much more helpful for folks like you and me than was her previous reputation of being the perfect saint.

To me what is remarkable about Mother Teresa is not her doubt, surely moments of doubt are a dime a dozen, but rather what is amazing was her ability to act in spite of her doubts. She spent nearly every moment of her life in a wrestling match with God. And yet, she never stopped reaching out to those in need. She never stopped acting in faith, despite her enormous doubts. She never, ever, left the wrestling mat. Like Jacob, she stayed in there, wrestling with God to the end, and surely she has received her blessing in heaven.

And so what about us? What about our doubts and fears, our insecurities and uncertainties? Are we “bad” Christians when we entertain our doubts? Surely not—for the creating God gave us brains to think and believe—and what is belief in the absence of doubt—it is fact and if it is fact, why then a need for faith? Perhaps this is best articulated by a story from Mark’s gospel in which the father of a boy who is about to be healed by Jesus says, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Likely this could be a mantra for many of us when it comes to our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ—especially—and here’s the moment you’ve been waiting for on this Consecration Sunday—especially when it comes to sharing our time, talent, and particularly our treasure with the world. We want to believe that sharing our talents with the world will make it a better place—whether that talent is singing in the choir, balancing the church’s books, doing mission work, teaching, or making a quilt—we want to believe that we have the ability to make a difference. We want our talents to be used for good and yet sometimes we wonder if that’s what’s happening. And in a world where time is precious and we don’t want to waste a moment, we want to know that serving coffee at coffee hour touches someone’s life, or that mowing the church lawn makes the place look attractive to someone who might come visit here, or that—what I believe is the most tedious job in this church—the marking of the attendance records that a deacon does after church each Sunday—really does help us to support and nurture the members of our congregation. We want to believe that our precious time is well-spent. And the same goes for our treasure—our money. It is hard for us to watch a bank balance diminish when we’re on a fixed income or to watch a portion of our paycheck go into an offering plate instead of into paying down a credit card balance and it can be difficult to know that we’re working hard for our money and then giving it over to others who may not be working nearly as hard as are we. And yet we give, we give not necessarily because we believe in a set of doctrines and principles, but we give because we have faith—we have trust that somehow, even

though we don't understand how, our giving will bring blessing to others and to ourselves. And I can't help but think that's what Mother Teresa had—trust.

Giving—whether it be of our talent, time, or treasure, can be a wrestling match. And like Mother Teresa, it may be something we do in spite of our doubts, not necessarily because we always believe, but rather because we know we can trust. Just as with Mother Teresa, we are called to trust enough to act—not to sit and wait for the spirit to move us because there's a good possibility that that day may not come. But we are called to act because it is often in the action that we become aware of the Spirit. Our trust in giving can lead us to believing.

And I trust that's what's going to happen here this morning as you bring forward your Time and Talent forms and also your pledge forms. The spirit is going to come alive in you and in this community of faith. And even if you're still wrestling with what or how you will give, I encourage you to give because by doing so you will show your trust and surely you will be a blessing to others and receive God's blessings yourself.

As Danielle and I offer a song as part of our giving today, I invite you think about the Time and Talent form in front of you. Fill it out if you have not already. At the conclusion of our duet, Marion will continue playing. At this time, please bring your Time and Talent form, and if you are pledging your pledge forms, to the front to offer it to God. This is something you all can do—whether you're pledging or not, whether you're a one-time visitor or a lifelong member. Regardless, we are all part of this little branch of God's family of faith today and so let us, as a family, consecrate ourselves—our talent, our time, and our treasure to God.