

August 6, 2017
Genesis 32: 22-31
Rev. Joy R. Haertig

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer."

At the beginning of the summer I invited you to put sermon ideas in a basket on the table near the front door. I got this idea from a colleague of mine – I recently learned that he asks his congregants to put their names on the question and then he talks with them about the background of the question and is sure to let them know what week he is going to address their question, that way he knows they will be there. I think those ideas are brilliant! So perhaps next year we will add those good ideas to the proposal.

So for now...I have two left.

The one that has been "staring" at me this week is a brief comment and a famous quote from Dylan Thomas...It reads:

It is never too late (or too early) to..."Go not gently into that good night. Rage, rage at the dying of the light".

There is so much packed into this brief quote and thought, and my response for today is influenced by the wonderful on-going story of Jacob from Genesis. In this classic section of the whole story we have Jacob wrestling with someone in the middle of the night. There is nothing gentle about it...Might he be literally wrestling with a being of some sorts? Or is it more symbolic – is he wrestling with his past? His fear of returning to his brother who he is certain could possibly still be angry that he might try and kill him? Is he wrestling with death itself - with the "dying of the light"? In a sense maybe it is all of the above.

I came upon a quote by the late David Foster Wallace who was himself reflecting on the writings of the German Novelist, Franz Kafka when he wrote the following:

"...the horrific struggle to establish a human self, results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from the horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact, our home."

There is a deep truth in this reflection that speaks to me of the symbolism of Jacob's wrestling. A central part of being human is the struggle itself. We struggle with our selves, with others, with God (is there one? Does it make any difference?). We struggle in our search for meaning; and most certainly with the reality of our mortality.

When I went looking for a picture for the front of the bulletin cover it was interesting to see the variety of old and modern paintings that artists have rendered from this story. Some artists saw it as a wrestling match between human men— others depicted it as the wrestling between dark and light. You will see in the one I chose from Rembrandt, it is hard to know if Jacob and the angel/God are wrestling or dancing.

There is a poetic truth in connecting wrestling with dancing...The more we fight the wrestling that comes with our human experience, the less dance-like it becomes. The more we come to understand the place and importance of our wrestling, the more we come to receive and experience the grace of the dance that is its partner.

I read an article recently about what someone has named "Ghosting". Ghosting is when someone who you were in some kind of relationship with simply quits communicating and more or less, disappears. It is often because some difficult emotions have come up and the person does not want to deal with them, so they simply "check out".

The Psychology today article I read was talking about how this happens in all kinds of ways and places – perhaps more so these days than in past generations because of the role of social media in our lives.

It happens in families – in institutions – it happens in churches.

When things get difficult...

It is terribly tempting to disengage.

We don't want to wrestle.

So we walk away with no explanation.

The first coffee hour conversation we had two weeks ago with our Vision Team inviting us to reflect on how we understand community, vitality, and how we use our church building gave me a deep sense of hope because so many of you came. As a pastor, you don't always know what is going on in the minds of your congregants. So your attendance gave me hope as well as information! You were engaged – whether you were talking or deeply listening – you were there – you showed up – you are part of the wrestling that needs to take place in this congregation at this time in our history.

I pray we will continue to stay in the wrestling-dance with each other and with the Holy Spirit that moves in our midst. The wrestling-dancing is so much better when we get to do it face to face, “ghosting”/walking away with no communication does not help us grow as a congregation; it does not help me grow as a pastor. I remember the words of a member from my former congregation when we were in the middle of some conflict – she said: “This is my church and I am not letting go, no matter what.”

We don't only “ghost” human relationships, we ghost God. We ghost our spiritual journey. We walk away from the struggle, the wrestling that is a significant part of our relationship with the holy. One quote I came upon this week when studying about Jacob and his night time wrestling match with God was what we often find in Old Testament scripture ---the people push back on God. They call God on God's promises, they shake their fists, they demand answers...they stay engaged, they stay in the struggle...The author said **“God is looking for partners not patsies.”** Jacob pushes and wrestles and dances with God. “God, you told me to go home, now you better keep me safe from my brother!” (At our coffee hour conversation we talked about how important it is that this be a welcoming place for atheists and agnostics --- I could not agree more! In my experience, when a person has come to a place of stating themselves an atheist/agnostic, it is because they have stayed in the struggle – they have wrestled. I have a great deal of respect for that.)

I mentioned a few weeks ago that Jacob was never really sure about this whole God and covenant thing that his Grandfather Abraham and father Isaac were into ---he wrestled with it –

and like many of us, he sort of forgot about the whole God thing until he was in a bad straight and then he would cry out for help...

Jacob never completely walked away either...And this time he went full-throttle and walked away with a limp. There was something in this encounter that enabled Jacob to claim his vulnerability and need for a Higher Power. The wrestling did indeed become more of a dance than a match. And God renamed Jacob. He gave him the name "Israel" which literally means **"you have striven with God and with humans and have overcome."**

He did not win or lose – he stayed in the "game".

On Saturday we celebrated the life of one of our church and community pillars, Ken Schubert. Those of us who attended the service learned that Ken was someone who stayed engaged in every aspect of his life– it was built into his fabric to take hold of life with its struggles and its joys.

When it came to the reality of human mortality, Ken entered into the wrestling match. I would say that Ken was as bold as Jacob and as determined as Dylan Thomas as he "raged and raged at the dying of the light". He and his beloved Lucia were determined to stay as engaged in living as long as possible. It was ultimately a gift for all of us, for so often we hide our vulnerabilities and challenges away from the public --- but then we lose the love that is also there to be given and received. Ken and Lucia, thank you for that gift...

The reality of our mortality is a core piece of our human wrestling – it never goes away...It only varies in our awareness of it.

At this time in my journey with my almost 92 year old father, he seems to wrestle with his mortality most in the darkness of night when he is having trouble sleeping, and more or less "dances" with it during the day.

I appreciate what Dylan Thomas is saying about not going gently into that good night of death -- - wrestling out every ounce of life we can possibly gain --- on the other hand, I have found that there is a grace and an ease that eventually comes to most of us when we come to accept that death is a real and even a welcome member of the dance team.

Jacob and Dylan Thomas has had me thinking about the “wrestling/dancing” match that is truly at the core of our human experience. Our deepest call from God that is made known to us in Jesus is: **To stay engaged.**

To stay in the wrestling/dancing match even when it is really, really difficult to face some of the emotions, decisions, complications, challenges; unexpected turns, a life – our world, can take.

In closing I want to share with you some words from Amy Korver, the lovely woman who has been a part of our congregation these past two years and is now on her way to The Netherlands to be a nannie for who knows how long.

(We have contact information for her in the office if you wish to be on her email list as she tells her story.)

She sent me this email which she wanted me to share with you...**It is an affirmation that this place has been a safe place for her to be real – a place where she could wrestle and dance, and experience the holy...You need to hear this too...**

Dear MUCC,

I miss you all already. Thank you so much for the beautiful shawl and the beautiful memories to go along with it.

You have been the church that I always hoped to find. Fresh out of college, when looking for a home church my main criteria was that I could invite anyone. Anyone of my loved ones. I wanted a place where they could be truly accepted, where I wouldn't have to explain that 'I believe this, but not this', and worry about them getting yet another negative and condemning view of church. I have found that place in you.

Too often the ones I love feel the necessity to live a dual life. They don't feel safe being the person that they are in all spots, and I'm so glad that I never have to hide who I am or what I love when I come to church. This is what church should be. When talking to a friend recently I said, “we tell each other when we're happy and when we're hurting. I don't feel like I have to 'put myself together' when I go to church. Church is where we should first think of when we're the most broken. It's where broken people go to be whole together.”

I am so incredibly grateful for our time together. You have shown me the joy of knowing your neighbors, of giving, of striving to make the world better for all.

May we continue to be so welcoming and engaged in the wrestling dance of life...
Amen.

