

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Mr. Noah Van Niel, Guest Preacher

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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 32: 22-31; Matthew 26:36-46

The Struggle of a Lifetime

At the risk of being overly confessional, have others of you noticed the unfortunate phenomenon that you get in the most fights with the people you care the most about? Melinda and I have, what I would consider, a very happy marriage. But by far I get in more fights with her than anyone else in my life. And yet she is also the person I love the most. When I was a teenager, I would get into fights with my parents whom I hold so dearly and yet could be so vicious towards. Why is that? I often wonder. Shouldn't it be that the people I love the most are the people it is easiest to be nice to all the time? It seems paradoxical.

I don't have an answer but I do have a few thoughts on the matter. I think there's something to the fact that proximity yields some level of unavoidable chafing. And there is also something in the fact that high emotions run both to the highest highs and the lowest lows; high passion can yield high frustration or outrage. And while that may not be pleasant, in my opinion, much more troubling is indifference. If you don't care, you won't bother getting worked up over something.

But in my mind the biggest reason for this unfortunate phenomenon stems from the fact that when you love someone, when you really care about them, you show them all of who you are. And all of who we are includes some ugly parts; some impatient parts; some selfish parts. True relationship requires mutual emotional vulnerability; we are naked before those whom we love. The parts we work so hard to hide from the rest of the world with a perfect smile are exposed with those who are close to us. We don't want the outside world to know the real us, because the real us is flawed, imperfect and maybe if they saw it, they wouldn't like us. That's why emotional truth requires so much trust, the time taken to build a relationship of care and kindness before we can expose the full truth of who we are. And part of that full truth is unpleasant, and leads to us struggling with the ones we love the most.

Jacob and Jesus also struggled with the one they loved the most: God. In this episode from Genesis, Jacob is on the run after having swindled first his brother Esau and then his father in law Laban. He's not a great guy. And yet he is the father of the People of Israel. And in this passage he is met by a mysterious man on his journey and he spends the night wrestling with him. It's a metaphor for the spiritual life taken literally: he wrestles with God. And it goes on all night, even through his hip injury, and yet Jacob will not give up, he will not let go of his need to come to some sort of reconciliation, some sort of closure from this grace-filled grappling. And so he demands a blessing. And he gets one. Not only that he gets renamed, a name that not only will live on for thousands of years to come but a name that translated means "one who strives with God," one who wrestles with God, fights with him. And what is the history of the people of Israel but a history of a people wrestling with their God; it's a relationship fraught with tension and failure and anger on both sides. They squabble like an old married couple. And yet they are and they remain the chosen people.

Jesus, our paragon of faithful living also has his struggle with God. This is most apparent in the Garden of Gethsemane which we read from Matthew this morning. Here Jesus, in one of my favorite passages asks God if he could somehow get out of the future that awaits him: a future of physical torture, ridicule, betrayal, and death. He says God, if it's possible, make it so I don't have to go through this. I really don't want to do this. He is "deeply grieved" and agitated to the point that Luke tells us in his account of this moment that he was sweating blood. The stress was just too much and he was wrestling in his own prayerful way, with God, his Father. And yet, in one of the most important turns in Scripture, he is willing to say that if God really does want him to go through with it, he will: Not my will but yours be done. It may not be as dramatic as Jacob wrestling with the Angel at Peniel, but I find the vignette of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to be another profound moment of a paragon of faith struggling with God.

I could also have chosen almost any passage from the book of Job. Job howls at God, cursing his own existence, demands a reckoning, and explanation for his misfortune. I could have chosen a whole number of Psalms, songs of Lament which beg and bargain and wail at their creator; mourning his seemingly absent holiness.

So what are we to make of these two seminal figures of scripture, as well as the numerous other examples from the Bible, having intense moments of struggle with God?

By way of an answer let me return to the hospital. For those of you who weren't here last week, I've spent this summer working as a chaplain at Mass General Hospital. Much of my work has been focused on a Cancer ward with patients who are very sick and many are imminently dying. And I've had numerous conversations with people at the hospital this summer that go something like this. They identify themselves as a man or woman devoted to the Christian faith. And when I ask them if they pray they say something like, "Oh sure I say my prayers all the time." Great, I think.

"What do you pray about?" I ask. "Oh mostly I just say thank you, and you are so wonderful and I am so blessed and then I pray that he keep my family safe." Wait, I think, you are here, dying of cancer and all you say to God is thank you? Don't you ever get mad at God? You've told me at points in our conversation that you're disease makes you so mad and you feel it's unfair and you are frustrated that you are dying and not getting better and you are scared, and yet you don't say that to God? How authentic of a prayer are you offering? Now before you report me to the Chaplaincy police, I say this in a much gentler way. But I'm being a bit provocative on purpose to illustrate a larger point that I have seen repeatedly in the hospital from people in infuriating medical situations, an inability or a refusal to bring that fear, that anger and that frustration to God in *prayer*. And so what do we bring? An "if you don't have anything nice to say don't say anything at all," everything is alright, don't want to upset you by telling you what's really going on in my slowly breaking heart, relationship? We, and I'll include myself in that, are afraid to struggle, to wrestle with God. But what about when things are tough? What about when it feels like God is absent? What about when you are in anguish? What about when you are angry with Him?

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid that God will be mad at us? Are we afraid of being petty? Are we afraid of being ungrateful and impolite? Yeah, probably. But is that worth sacrificing a truly open and personal relationship with God? I'm pretty sure you're not going to hurt His feelings; he's pretty tough. And I believe in my gut that what God longs for above all else is a close, intimate relationship with each and every one of us. Not some candy-coated reality. Bring your whole self to him. Bring the blessed parts but just as important bring the broken parts. Be real with God, for God is real. And yet we keep him at arm's length in the name of civility. And what ends up happening is we hold these very natural feelings of anger (believe me, Cancer is an existentially infuriating

disease) and they serve to block us off from the very power that we think we are protecting from our true feelings. We become the brick-layers of our own prison walls.

I tried to establish at the beginning that truly intimate relationships have unavoidable moments of conflict and struggle. And that's precisely because when we offer our whole selves to someone else that includes the parts of our self that are negative as well as positive. And by tracing the example of a couple of exemplary Biblical figures, Jacob and Jesus, who engage in their own nighttime wrestling matches with God, I was hoping to show us some examples for how struggling with God in the name of honest relationship is central to our tradition.

But why do it? Why be a child of Israel, one who strives with God? Because you see in every one of these examples the figure who is willing to struggle openly and honestly with God is rewarded. He is given a new name and blessing to become the father of the faithful in the case of Jacob; he receives the gift of Resurrection and eternal life in the case of Jesus; he receives all his possessions back double and then some in the case of Job. God rewards those brave enough to come before him with their whole panoply of emotions, who have enough courage to grapple with Him in the name of honesty and authenticity, and demand a blessing. Because it is in that presentation of our full selves, even the parts of ourselves that are angry or hurt by God, that gives space for God to engage with us in an authentic way. Otherwise we are holding back our true selves and holding Him at bay. Only when we come fully before him, are our hearts open enough for him to move in and start cleaning house.

Now this struggle can take many forms. It is often brought about by disease or loss. But just as often it is a struggle of belief wrestling with doubt. As one of my favorite passages, Mark 9:24 reads: "Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief." If you really believe in God, what do you say when bad things happen? Do you just shrug and say, "not for us to know." What about Miracles? What about Science, how does that fit into your understanding of your Christian faith. There is so much to be integrated into the life of a believer. And often it is the case that answers or meaning is in short supply. Do you bring your doubts to God too? Do you tell him there are things you get hung up on in the Apostles Creed? Can you be that honest with Him? Can you say God I really don't understand you right now? God I can't feel you right now? I don't see you right now. If you do this, I am willing to bet that you'll be amazed at the ways in which your relationship with Him will blossom. But to be clear this is not a one and done event. As we go through life we continually encounter things which will challenge our beliefs and potentially make us furious at God. And so this struggle, this struggle for true, real intimate connection with God is the struggle of a lifetime. And it grows and it changes with every new obstacle encountered.

So knowing that, knowing that it is going to be hard and never ending, can we do it? Can we wrestle with God? Do we love him enough to be honest with Him? I get frustrated with God often. And it is because I love him so much, because I want nothing more than to be close to Him that I do it. It is because I believe that I challenge Him. You have to believe in God to get mad at Him. You have to think someone is ought there if you're going to curse the dark. For with high passion comes high outrage. And I'll get mad at God a million times before I will tolerate feeling indifference towards Him. Because it is then that He will have cause to worry, and so will I.

Let us pray.

O God we come before this morning with our whole selves, these whole selves whom you have made and declared good. We offer them to you, our joys and our hopes, as well as our fears and frustrations. Accept our offering; reward us with the gift of your presence that we might know you intimately even as we are fully known by you, in the name of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, Amen.