

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Wrestling with God"

Scripture: Genesis 32:9-13, 22-30, Psalm 34:1-8

Opening Hymn: Eternal, Unchanging, we sing to your praise 337 St. Denio

Closing Hymn: Now thank we all our God 457

Children's Hymn: Jesus loves me, this I know 373

Choruses: Cornerstone, I will sing of the mercies of the Lord

Rev. Steve Filyk

September 22, 2019

Community Chili Lunch Sunday

Most people pray.

Most Canadians pray.

A couple of years ago

The Canadian pollster, Angus Reid, was the guest speaker
At the BC Leadership Prayer breakfast in Vancouver.

Sharing the latest polling results

He told the gathering that "while weekly church attendance
has dropped from 56 per cent in 1966 to 15 per cent,
85 per cent of Canadians still pray..."ⁱ

Most people pray.

Most Canadians pray.

You likely raised a few words to heaven yourself,
this past week.

As for how we pray

this takes different shapes and forms.

Writer Ann Lamott speaks of her own prayers
regularly falling into two categories:

'Help me, help me, help me'

and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

These descriptions are broad strokes.

‘Help me’ prayers, prayers of petition can be used for matters that are trivial and matters that are important.

They can be very pointed and particular or very open-ended.

In any case they all involve us making a claim on God:

Asking, begging, even demanding

that God would intervene in our situation.

Through repeated requests we strive to win God over to our agenda,
And help us obtain what we want.

Prayers of petition involve a sort of wrestling with God.

Now most of us recognise that our prayers express **our** agenda.

What we don’t always realise is that God has an agenda too.

The God of the Bible is more than a cosmic vending machine.

[Put the coin in the slot and down drops the candy bar.]

This God is a ‘Wholly Other’

who often responds in unexpected ways.

PAUSE

Today we enter the biblical story of Jacob.

Jacob the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham.

Jacob you may remember was a twin.

When he was born he was holding onto his brother’s ankle.

Hence the name Jacob
Which means 'heal' or
'trickster' or 'supplanter'.ⁱⁱ

Not a flattering name.
And Jacob managed to lived up to it.

As a young man "Jacob had tricked his brother Esau
out of his birthright
and out of their father's "blessing"
which rightfully belonged to... the eldest son."

[In the second instance he dressed up in his brother's clothes
And covered himself with goatskins
To deceive his blind and aged father...]

[The Bible tells us] that "Esau hated Jacob,"
[that] Esau resolves within himself... "I will kill my brother Jacob".

Because of the threat to his life from Esau,
Jacob leaves his home and family in Canaan
and makes a new life with the family of his uncle Laban
in Haran in Mesopotamia,
the native birthplace of Abraham and Sarah.

While Jacob is in Haran, God is with Jacob
and blesses him richly with wives and children
and much livestock.

After many years, [a much older] Jacob
finally resolves to return home to Canaan.

[But now he must confront his past
And the brother that he had deceived]

As Jacob crosses the Jordan River in Canaan,
he prays [to God for protection]...ⁱⁱⁱ

We all pray.
'Help me, help me, help me'
and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

When Jacob was facing up to meet his aggrieved brother
Jacob prays the longest prayer that is recorded in Genesis,
The first book of the Bible.

"Save me, I pray" Jacob calls out.
"Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau,
for I am afraid he will come and attack me,
and also the mothers with their children."^{iv}

In the same prayer Jacob acknowledges God's kindness
In the same prayer Jacob acknowledges his own unworthiness.
And yet Jacob is also assertive, even demanding.
He calls on God to keep that promise
God first made to his grandfather
and then later to him:

But ***you have said*** [Jacob prayed],
 ‘I will surely make you prosper
 and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea,
 which cannot be counted.’”^v

When Jacob is preparing to confront an angry brother
 Jacob calls on God for help.

And that night God answers him.
 That night God appears to him.
 And they wrestle with each other all night long.

This match was brilliantly described earlier
 in the monologue Gord delivered for us.
 If you want to hear it again
 Pick up Frederick Buechner’s book: *Son of Laughter*.

Jacob calls on God
 To claim God’s promises,
 And bend God’s will to his own.

God turns up to answer him.
 God bends him and God breaks him
 Revealing that God has a will and an agenda of his own.

But even with a dislocated hip Jacob won’t let God go.
 Jacob asks for a blessing.
 Jacob is still making demands on God.

But this time there is a change.

This time there is a significant difference.

Before when he called on God,

Jacob had a specific plan, specific agenda:

He asked for safety and security.

Now after a night of wrestling

Jacob is ready to receive whatever God will give.

What God has for him is a new name, and a new identity.

Instead of being known as the Jacob, the ‘trickster’,

He will be known as Israel which the KJV renders as

“a prince who has power with God”.^{vi}

Jacob came to God to change his circumstance.

And God came to Jacob to change his identity, his character.

[repeat paragraph]

So what have you been trying to grasp from God’s hands?

Could it be that God has an even greater blessing for you?

Amen.

ⁱ Also noted that 40% of Canadians pray weekly, a number that has remained consistent over the past century. Ed Hird “SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING: Poll shows 85 per cent of Canadians still pray” North Shore News June 29, 2016

www.nsnews.com/deep-cove-crier/spiritually-speaking-poll-shows-85-per-cent-of-canadians-still-pray-1.2290464

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ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann *Genesis* 268

ⁱⁱⁱ Dennis T. Olson “Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A” *The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts* 61

^{iv} Genesis 32:11 NIV

^v Quote from Genesis 32:12, see Genesis 28:13ff for promises

^{vi} Actually “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.” Genesis 32:28 KJV