

THY NAME IS LOVE JULY 12, 2015

Genesis 32:24-32

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*Today begins a series of 4 sermons in which the associate ministers at Old Mission talk about their particular area of ministry. I once had a colleague in ministry tell me that everything the church was involved in was actually evangelism. I countered that the same could be said about Christian Education. To be fair, I think a case can be made that the church's mission be defined by every area of ministry. *That is to say, if your perspective is evangelism, you could say that everything that happens in the church is about the Great Commission – going to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. If you are a Christian Educator, you could say that everything the church engages in is about Biblically educating people so they understand the love of God and how they might respond to that love in the world. If you are in charge of worship, you might see the mission of the church as preaching the Gospel and then taking the Gospel into the world to serve our neighbors. And of course, looking through the lens of pastoral care, isn't the church's mission *really* to represent Christ and the church in a broken world by being caring presence to all those in need? *It's certainly biblical to bear one another's burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Aside from perspective, I would suggest another factor to aid in processing the messages in this series: I heard a preaching professor once say to his ministry students: Each one of you has **one** good sermon in you – you will preach it over and over again.

Perhaps you will use different words and stories, but you will always be making the same basic point! Those two factors resonate increasingly with me –those of us who lead in ministry each have a particular *perspective* and a particular *message*.

*When I give children's sermons, you all seem to know that the right answer to any question I ask is God or Love. In one way or another, my bottom line, my message, is always God is Love. For some, that may seem simplistic, but my passion for pastoral care really comes from the challenge of re-presenting God's love in a world which is often so full of brokenness and evil. There is SO much we do not understand. I once took a class entitled The Nature of Evil. The nature of evil is a fundamental issue for Christianity – and for pastoral care. Walter Lowe, the Professor for that course, suggested that most explanations about evil either limit God, give God a dark side or fail to take suffering seriously. One of the strengths of Christianity is that it does take suffering seriously while at the same time claiming God is good and all powerful and God's nature is love. But God's relationship to evil is problematic for all of us at some point. I am drawn to- and at the same time - challenged by pastoral care because it is to walk with people in the most difficult, painful times in their lives, assuring them of God's love and hopefully modeling that there is still security in that love. I fervently believe that God allows the creation freedom and because of that freedom, bad choices are made and bad things inevitably happen to good people. Rather than causing our pain, God suffers with us. *The word compassion literally means "to suffer with". But

to convey the message that “God is love” to those who are facing the evil of cancer, the loss of a child, painful chronic illness, the heartache of divorce, the effects of addiction or financial ruin is anything but simple.

John Wesley went on the record to say that the solo you just heard, one of the 6000 written by his brother Charles, was his favorite hymn. It musically tells today’s scripture story. It might at first seem a strange choice to describe how we are all God’s beloved children, but it reminds me in many ways of the tasks involved in pastoral care. Basically, it is a story about how we can struggle with God and survive – and not only survive, but come out better, stronger, more directed and more loving. It is certainly my prayer for those I interact with in my role as Minister of Congregational Care – that they are comforted and strengthened in their times of struggle. *Ernest Hemingway once wisely said, “The world breaks everyone, but some get strong in the broken places”. It is the great challenge of pastoral care to help people get strong in their broken places.

Today’s scripture story maps out how that happens. As we join the story, Jacob is in flight. He has wronged his brother Esau, stealing his birthright. Esau is pursuing Jacob along with 400 men. By way of his servants, Jacob has sent gifts to Esau, hoping to appease him. But his fear is that Esau will catch up with him and kill him. He and his family and servants come to a ford in the Jabbock River. A ford in a river is a shallow place where one can cross and Jacob does in fact send his family and servants across, but I am reminded

here of a quote from Yogi Berra – “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” The ford in the Jabbock River creates a fork in the road for Jacob in regard to his future. *Frightened and alone, the scripture tells us Jacob is accosted and “a man wrestles with him till the break of day”. The man does not “prevail” against Jacob, but does strike him in the hip. Jacob does not want the man to leave until he blesses him. Instead the man changes Jacob’s name. Jacob then asks for the man’s name in return; it is not given, but the man does bless him. Jacob announces that he knows it is God with whom he has just struggled, and that he has seen God’s face and has survived. *He continues on his journey, but he has a limp. So, how does this illustrate pastoral care? St. Augustine famously said that our souls are restless until they rest in God. *I would add that **every** struggle with evil or what we do not understand is ultimately a struggle with God. I believe every one of us struggles with God as we confront the inevitable experiences of what is painful and inexplicable in our lives. Pastoral care is the process of walking with our brothers and sisters in those times.

I know a simple poem which reflects the truth of this in our lives:

*I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chattered all the way

But left me none the wiser, for all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow, and ne’er a word said she;

But oh, the things I learned from her, when Sorrow walked with me.

Returning to the scripture: we all reach forks in the road (or stream); times of stress when our usual ways of coping are not working. Doing pastoral care is helping people understand that they

can prevail, that they can fight with God, blame God, or even reject God and God will not desert them. *Jacob survived, but continued with a limp, which tells us that we are altered when we struggle with God, it changes us; we do not emerge from the fight the same as we were. God leaves a mark on us. But we can emerge stronger in our broken places.

In the scripture, the man/god leaves at the break of day. That tells us we do not come face to face with God in full light until we are born to eternal life. In the meantime, we see dimly in a broken world and we struggle. But Jacob's story reminds us God travels with us and blesses us in the fight: Again from the story, via the hymn:

'Tis Love 'tis love Thou diest for me, I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee, pure universal Love thou art.
To me, to all, thy mercies move, thy nature and thy name is Love.

It is my great honor to also be on that journey with you and God in pastoral care. It is a privilege to be trusted with your deepest feelings – including your doubt and anger and fear. For me, it is walking on sacred ground. *I can't fix what is wrong or take away your pain, but I can assure you that your church is there for you and that God's nature and God's name is Love.

In the next three weeks, the other clergy will be telling you why they are passionate about mission and Christian education and evangelism and why those things are at the heart of what the church is about – and they are! *But ultimately all areas in ministry

are ways for you to know and to experience that God's Nature and God's Name is Love! AMEN.