

Wrestling with Faith

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 6, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
2nd Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*
Text: Genesis 32:22-31

As we continue our engagement with pondering the basic question of “why church?” it seems only appropriate to look at a story from Genesis, the first book in our Bible. This text happens to be the Old Testament passage for the Revised Common Lectionary this week. I intentionally moved away from Lectionary based preaching and teaching because, after 15+ years of doing it, I was bored. I felt it covered the same old stories, psalms and epistles all the time on a rotating basis over three years, which it does. At one point I could have told you exactly what Old and New Testament stories were skipped over in the Lectionary as proof that its summary of Scripture and faith was just too narrow, too contrived. I was sure I was right. So, perhaps you can imagine my surprise when I rediscovered the Lectionary these past few weeks as I worked to plan worship. Take this Sunday for example. I knew I wanted us to reflect together on our mutual contemporary struggles with faith – what it means to have faith; how faith and the church are interrelated (or not) and what the broadening lack of faith portends in our society at large. I checked with the Lectionary texts for this week and who did I discover waiting for me there but my old friend Jacob.

Who was Jacob? I’m glad you asked! Jacob was one of the patriarchs of ancient Israel and was even given the name Israel by God at one point in time. He was the son of Isaac and Rebecca and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. You may remember him as the second of the twin sons born to Isaac. You may also remember him for his stunt of tricking his brother Esau out of his birthright and then tricking Isaac into giving him the older son’s blessing. Jacob was also

the father of Joseph, of “the coat of many colors” fame, who eventually brought Jacob and all his siblings and their families to live in Egypt where they eventually became slaves after a benevolent Pharaoh was replaced by a brutal one.¹ Jacob was and is a critical figure in the history of God’s people. As you might imagine, there are a lot of stories about Jacob in the Bible but the one we are considering this morning comes from a time when Jacob was returning home, after many years living in another country, to make peace with his brother Esau. At one point along the journey, Jacob sent the rest of his traveling group ahead while he remained behind on the other side of the river. Not sure why, but he did. As night fell, Jacob soon found himself locked in mortal combat with a stranger. They fought and wrestled all night. Then, as dawn was breaking, the stranger attempted to break off and leave but Jacob demanded to know who he was. The stranger refused to tell Jacob his name but he did give him a blessing. It was at this moment Jacob realized he had just spent the last several hours literally wrestling with God.

Now that is something we can all relate to. Not necessarily the whole physical wrestling with God to the point of injury part as Jacob did, but still. Wrestling with God and faith is part of being a person of faith. History and literature going back millennia are literally filled with stories of people wrestling with the whole idea of God. Is God real? If God is real, then why is there so much evil in the world? If God is real, then why does God allow for terrible tragedies to happen, taking the lives of innocents? Why have so many really horrible things happened, done in the name of God? Honestly, the list of questions is endless. They are the stuff of more doctoral dissertations than any of us would ever believe and yet we are still no closer to answers than anyone else has been before. Even Jesus, throughout his ministry,

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob>

was attempting to answer the question of what it meant to struggle – wrestle – with the whole notion of who God was as he realized that the answers offered by the Temple leadership seemed to have little to do with God as Jesus knew him.

So, dear ones, as we admit to our struggles with faith, with struggling to understand and make sense, make meaning, of God’s role in our lives – if we think there even is one – we are in the best of company. All the patriarchs struggled with this as did the prophets. Jesus struggled with it and his disciples/apostles after he was gone. In truth, wrestling with faith IS what the life of faith is all about. When it comes to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit – not to mention the fantastical stories of the Bible about them all – there is nothing else to do with them but wrestle with what it all means to us – right here and right now. There is no more urgent contemporary question for God’s people, however they might identify themselves, than this notion of making meaning of the mess the world is in right now and how God could possibly be a part of a solution *to* the mess instead of being the excuse used by too many *for* the mess.

God as the excuse for the mess? Oh absolutely. Do you know why some far right, Christian conservative politicians continue harping on plans to dismantle the environmental regulations addressing climate change? Because they believe climate change is God’s will. Climate change is part of God’s ultimate plan for the “end days.” Out of control fires? Proof that hell is real. Dying sea creatures, rising waters, floods, droughts – they’re all part of God’s “end days” scenario from which only those who are “saved” will escape. Politicians hide behind nonsense arguments like reducing unnecessary regulation, but that’s not what it’s about. No, it’s about one narrow form of belief which claims to have exclusive understanding of God and what it means to have faith.

God as the reason for the mess? No. Just no. That's not what I think of when I think about wrestling with God. I wrestle with God through the big questions like why bad things happen to good people or why God "lets" certain things happen. Some of us go so far as to wonder if God can possibly be real when there is obviously so much that is evil and cruel in the world. We wonder if God hears our prayers or the prayers we offer in church. Some of us wonder about why we even study the Bible when so many awful stories are in it. These are all excellent questions. They are exactly the questions the church should be helping you to wrestle with. Questions about life and the meaning of life are always questions about God, even if we don't frame them that way. And the church is the place God created – yes, I did say that – *the church is the place God created* to be where folks come to wrestle with these questions together, to support one another in our wonderings and our wanderings to and away from faith. The church, as it has evolved from its earliest days when the followers just gathered together to break bread, sing and pray, is all about being the wrestling mat for faith. This simple reality, dear ones, has slipped from our awareness. And this loss of vision, of understanding of purpose, is the reason why churches these days are struggling themselves.

Don't be fooled by the occasional stories you hear from family and friends about how their church isn't struggling. It is. In some the struggles are less visible. In some the struggles are ignored until it's too late to do anything. Dear ones, mega churches are closing their doors – quietly and with as little fanfare as possible. Small clapboard churches in the countryside and little storefront churches in cities slip away into the night. Catholic churches are cutting the number of masses drastically and priests are assigned to cover 2, 3 or even 4 churches. Why is this happening? As you might imagine, there are

lots of theories. One thing we know for sure is that many millennials and Gen Z's do not find much of value in the churches they grew up in. Yes, we in the church have nothing to be proud of there. However sincerely we offered the next generations Christian education, Confirmation, Sunday School, youth groups and mission trips, many of them have left the church never to return. Why? And what does mean for the future of the church – ours and so very many others?

In an article which appeared in *The Atlantic* just this past week, author Jake Meador writes,

“nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska is no longer Christian. That’s not unusual. Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That’s something like 12 % of the population...”²

He continues on to note,

“This change is also bad news for America as a whole: Participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity and more stable families – all of which are desperately needed in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness and alcohol and drug dependency.”³

He then references the work done by Jim Davis and Michael Graham, published in the book *The Great Dechurching*. One of the conclusions these authors make is that, unsurprisingly, “religious abuse and more general corruption in churches have driven people away.”⁴ However, they also note that “a much larger share of those who have left church have done so because of “how American life works in the 21st century.”⁵ They explain that instead of trying to enhance such amorphous life qualities as mutuality, community, care and compassion, modern American society is now

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/christian-church-community-participation-drop/674843/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

“designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of communality that doesn’t contribute to one’s own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one’s children.”⁶

They also explain that the very limited down time in this reality to devoted to rest and recovery from the frenetic pace of life this new cultural reality requires. The authors define this new reality as “*workism*” where all of life revolves around earning a living in order to claim as much of the American Dream as possible. They observe, “workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn’t add up.”⁷

Yikes! The church as a math problem that doesn’t add up! Now there’s a frightening thought and yet we know there is truth to it. We worry about numbers all the time!! How many folks are here; how many folks are pledging, how the financials are looking, how much is the electric bill this month and so on and so on. Dear ones, on some level these math problems are our reality. But on another level, they aren’t. I would argue that our math problems are really a people problem but not in the way you think. Yes, it would be wonderful to have more people and, God willing, we will be directing more of efforts to improving this together as the months pass by. But, when I say a people problem, I really mean you and me. Why are we the problem? Because we are just too darn quiet, and passive. This is where we need to take a page from our brothers and sisters in the Black church. They are not quiet about their faith. They shout it out at the top of their lungs. They remind folks all the time that God is good and God is good all the time. They invite, sometimes pull, folks into church and when they come in the door they make them feel

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

welcome and loved. In other words, they do not ever hide that God walks with them every step of every day. They do not think of Jesus Christ as a cuss word especially needed in times of tremendous frustration or anger. They always, always, always make room for the Holy Spirit in worship and in life, each day. They don't wrestle with their faith, dear ones. They revel in it. And so should we.

How do we do that? How do we, the modern day descendants of the Puritans who are sometimes now referred to as the "frozen chosen," how do we become alive in the faith – so alive that people want to be here. So alive that the alternative we offer to the workism mentality fades into the background so much that it no longer dominates the families who become part of this community of God's faithful. Instead, being family together is what matters most within the context of this community which will nurture it. Wrestling with faith then becomes an exercise in coming closer to God so that we can love and support each other as God needs us to. Wrestling with faith visibly then becomes our role and purpose within our community. This, dear ones, is how we continue to function as the beacon of hope in our little corner of the world that we have always striven to be.

So, at this point you are either excited, overwhelmed or scared to death. Hopefully all three. Good. That's where I am too. And that just means we're going to figure this out together, one step at a time, one day at a time, one prayer at a time. Thank you, Jesus, for the challenges ahead! May we have the strength and wisdom we need for the work that awaits us. Amen.