

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
July 31, 2011

Matthew 14:13–21
Genesis 32:22–31

MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT

You know, I didn't sleep too well last night. And I don't tell you that to gain sympathy, or to elevate myself, or to try to somehow mysteriously identify with this passage. I just had one of those nights when weariness or old fears—I don't know—when past criticisms and some level of misgivings or self-loathing all came together at the right time. I had that pastor's nightmare—the one where you oversleep on Sunday morning and wake up about a half an hour into the worship service, or where you forget an important appointment that really makes a difference in someone else's life. You couple that with the accusatory memories that linger, the current rejection, and really all of us know what Jacob is experiencing, for we can have those nightmarish days any time. You know how it goes. You overheard what someone said at work about you. You thought of what you should have done or could have done that would have been better than what actually happened.

Now, I hadn't planned to recount my night for you in this sermon. But last night happened, almost like a reminder of how we all have enough pain and if we take it all on ourselves, the burden is too much. I hope in the coming weeks your pain and grief will be met by the classes that Wendy Maiwurm, LCSW, and Presbyterian elder and Stephen Minister, is leading in our Friendship Room. The class meets just prior to this service, at 8:45 AM, and it will run for five more weeks. I was blessed this morning, as were others, by a Presbyterian elder bringing us good news about grief, about the faith.

But make no mistake about it ... Jacob's night is a wrestling match with God. He has prayed for God to help him. But like so many of us, I don't think he was prepared for how seriously God would take his prayer. This struggle—this wrestling match—is about how Jacob will live after that night. Will he continue to use all the coping skills that he has amassed over his lifetime, those mechanisms for successfully tricking others into doing what he wanted? Will he continue to be the heel or will he start to live in a new way, God's way?

Think about it. In order for Jacob to be reconciled with God, and hopefully with his brother Esau, Jacob has to give up something which had always been his pride—something that had worked for him. No wonder he walks with a limp after this. Jacob had to give up his illusion of power and success and happiness. You have met those kinds of people, haven't you? No matter the situation, whatever they have been doing, whatever they have, they are better than everyone else. And they insist on telling you about it.

That was Jacob—constantly proving himself, his self-worth. Every step of his life was saying: "I really am worth loving." Every ounce of energy he had, he put in to that pretense of power and success and happiness, when it was all just that—Jacob faking it.

And now he is wrestling with God. And God is offering him peace and joy and God's love.

I took the title from a sermon by one of my favorite theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and he calls this story, the "Magnificent Defeat." And it is just that, isn't it? Finally, Jacob can admit to himself that he belongs completely to God. And this occasion demands something radically new. It demands a baptism if you will, or what we referred to long ago as a christening which was literally a *Christening*, for God convinces Jacob once and for all that he will always be his beloved child, God's child.

When was the last time you felt completely convinced that God feels about you the way God feels about Christ? That's a christening—that's a new awareness. I wonder if we even think it's okay to feel that way, to feel *Christened*? Maybe when we are finally open to God's understanding of us and God's truth for us, the reality of God's grace will take over and our relationship with God will be bigger, more expansive, more accepting (as we've said in the past few Sundays: more accepting than we have been willing to embrace up until this point.)

Now if you are going to wrestle with God, you are going to have to not only embrace God, but accept God's embrace of you. And I encourage a little dusting off every now and then, as Jacob experienced. But first, we may need to wrestle with our desire to be blessed because of our cunning, our self-reliance, our self-sufficiency. It's very vogue today to talk about being self-sufficient, self-renewing. But we were made to rely on the Holy Spirit. We were created to rely on God's future instead of constantly reciting to ourselves should-haves and could-haves, for they always accuse us of doing less than our best. I think it's time we let go of that for a little while.

So, like the woman who was the grabber, we can become the one who is christened, the new, as one of God's children. Like Jacob, we can prevail by surrendering and receiving that new name. I know the Hebrew is supposed to be translated "Israel—one who wrestles with God." But when I read it, I hear: "Good wrestler, Jacob. Good wrestler. Go out—go out now in front of your wives and your children and rely on my strength and see what I can do." This is God's word. May God's goodness embrace all of us. Amen.