

The First Baptist Church, Midland
November 8, 2009
Genesis 12:1-3; 32:22-32

Wrestling For a Blessing
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: God's Blessings

Mitch Albom of *Tuesdays With Morrie* fame has written a new book and it is wonderful. It is called *Have a Little Faith*, and it's a true story about Albom's experience with a rabbi and a pastor. (Mitch Albom. Have a Little Faith: A True Story. Hyperion: New York. 2009) I know... it sounds like a joke is coming, doesn't it? *Well, there's this story about a priest, a rabbi and a pastor...* But this book is not a joke. It is a serious chronology of Albom's experiences with these two very special men and how they led him to a renewal of his faith and a rediscovery of his hope. This morning, I'd like to focus upon the rabbi for a couple minutes as we prepare to think about what it means to wrestle with God.

His name is Albert Lewis but he is known as *Reb* throughout the book. And one day about ten years ago he called Mitch Albom and asked him to do his eulogy. You see, Lewis was Albom's rabbi when he was a child growing up in Haddon Heights, NJ. Needless to say this caught the well known author quite by surprise as he had been away from home and his local synagogue for years and his relationship with this man had long been severed. But this is the story of how they were reconnected. And I'd like to share with you one snippet from this chronicle which sheds light upon the remarkable spirit of this rabbi. I apologize to my Sunday School class who heard me share this story last week.

Albert Lewis was a very open minded man who spent his life pursuing friendships and professional relationships with pastoral colleagues of all faiths. But even he was shocked by his experience with a catholic priest early in his ministry.

The Reb's synagogue and the priest's church were located in close proximity and it happened that one of the Jewish high holidays fell on a Sunday and the congregation had come out in full force... kind of the way it used to be for Christians on Christmas and Easter. All those people meant there were a lot of cars and since the Jewish service had started before the Catholic mass, it meant all the parking in the area was taken.

The priest was more than agitated over the situation and he verbally accosted a man named Gunther who was overseeing the parking for his synagogue. He yelled about all the cars by his church and demanded that they be moved because it was Sunday morning and *his* people needed to have a place to park so they could come to *his* church. "Get them out of here," he hollered at Gunther. "You Jews move your cars now!"

"But it's the High Holiday," Gunther said.

“Why must it be on a Sunday,” the priest yelled.

“The date was set three thousand years ago,” Gunther replied. Being an immigrant, he still spoke with a German accent. The priest glared at him, then uttered something almost beyond belief.

“They didn’t exterminate enough of you.”

Gunther was enraged. His wife had spent three and a half years in a concentration camp. He wanted to slug the priest. (IBID. pgs. 69-71)

I confess that when I hear these kinds of stories I find myself wrestling with my emotions. On the one hand, I feel outrage and anger with the priest. On the other, I have sympathy and compassion for Gunther. And in the middle of it all, I find myself asking “why?”

How can people be so mean to each other? How can God allow this kind of animosity and hatred to go on? Oh, I know the theological answer. I understand that we have been created by God with the freedom to move in any direction we choose and to make any decision we want. I know that we are free to either love or to hate. And I know that we are far from perfect and that it is our imperfection – our sin – that distorts our ability to always do the loving and caring thing. But still I wrestle with why this has to be and I seek to discern ways to reconcile those broken places in our relationships.

Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to this wonderful story in Genesis 32. Are you familiar with Jacob... the man representing the third generation in Abraham’s line? Through deception and deceit, he fooled his father Isaac and stole the birthright which rightfully belonged to his brother, Esau. And Esau was furious. You see, the reality is that sometimes even within our families we can do ugly things to hurt each other.

Anyway, for fear of his brother’s reprisal Jacob took off not knowing where he was going. The years passed and he established himself in another land growing very wealthy. His family was large and his possessions great when one day he decided it was time to return home. The distance and the brokenness had taken their toll. In his heart, he knew he had to make amends with his brother. And that brings us to the moment of spiritual struggle.

All in his traveling party including his wives and children had gone ahead of Jacob to greet Esau and to make way for the brother’s coming. He sent them with peace offerings in an attempt to appease Esau and set the stage for a possible reconciliation. So on this particular night, Jacob was utterly alone. And there in the midst of his isolation when he had lots of time to think about his future, to reflect upon his mistakes and to define his intentions it happened. He found himself grappling in the night. The writer of Genesis says: **“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”** (Genesis 32:24)

Jacob had no idea who it was that was attacking, but he found himself pinned to the ground. Yet this old patriarch was no pushover. To the contrary, he waged an astonishing battle. Together they fought throughout the night as Jacob struggled to be free. And though both were strong, no one seemed to gain the upper hand.

At last the light of dawn began to shine and the match was waning. Now the attacker was trying to run so as not to be recognized. But Jacob wouldn't let go. Indeed he fought even harder to control his adversary until suddenly he recognized he had been wrestling with an angel.

With his recognition came a demand. As the angel pleaded for his freedom Jacob said, **“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”** In response the angel changed Jacob's name. Herein he would be called Israel which means “one who strives with God”.

What a fascinating story. But what do we make of it? At the risk of seeming simplistic, I think this is every person's story because we all struggle with God on occasion. Sometimes it's a struggle for meaning... sometimes a struggle for truth. Sometimes we ache as we fight for an answer to the great “why” questions of life. *Why do bad things happen to good people? Why must I suffer when others seem to drift through life without the slightest challenge? Why does everything seem to happen to me?* If ever there was a classic “victim” question, this is it.

Yet here is what else I discover in this story. It is when we have the courage to become deeply engaged in the struggle with God that we discover our greatest blessings. In this story with Jacob, we see that this is exactly what happened to this rugged antagonist. The harder he fought, the closer to God he became and reconciliation was his blessing. Listen to the way the Hebrew writer put it... **“Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him... He (Jacob) himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept... (And Jacob said), for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor.”** (Genesis 33:1, 3-4, 10b)

The struggles can be hard sometimes, folks, and the pains can be deep. But there is always the hope of new understanding if we're willing to struggle with God to discern his direction even though this is sometimes easier said than done. When you come to the heart of it all, God is the author of our blessings and He can and will come to us in the living of each new day. For the blessings that ultimately count are those which come to us when our lives intersect at profoundly spiritual levels. It is that moment of meeting when we acknowledge our true nature and worth in the eyes of God and recognize that same value and worth in our relationships with each other. Blessings are not confined to the moments of triumph and comfort. Nor are they found in the accumulation of the material elements in life. Rather, they are intended to be found in the intimacy which comes with reconciliation.

Now with all of this being said, allow me to return to the story with which we started. Gunther, you'll remember, was enraged with the priest because of his scandalous remarks, and ran to his rabbi. Listen to what happened.

The next day, the Reb phoned the Catholic archbishop who oversaw the area's churches and told him what had happened. The following day, the phone rang. It was the priest, asking if he could come over and talk.

The Reb met him at the office door. They sat down.

"I want to apologize," he said.

"Yes," the Reb said.

"I should not have said what I did."

"No, you should not have," the Rev said.

"My archbishop had a suggestion," the priest said.

"What is that?"

"Well, as you know, our Catholic school is in session now. And they will have their recess soon..."

The Rev listened.

Then he nodded and stood up.

And when the school doors opened and the kids burst out for recess, they saw the priest of St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church and the rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom walking arm in arm, around the schoolyard.

Some kids blinked.

Some kids stared.

But all of them took notice.

You might think that an uneasy truce; two men forced to walk around a schoolyard, arm in arm. You might think a certain bitterness would haunt the relationship. But somehow, in time, they became friends. And years later, the Reb would be inside that Catholic church.

At the priest's funeral.

“I was asked to help officiate,” the Reb recalled. “I recited a prayer for him. And I think, by that time, he might have thought it wasn’t so bad.” (IBID. pgs. 70-71)

Friends, sometimes we wrestle with God for understanding and clarity, and out of the struggle the blessings come. But here’s the thing and mark this clear... those blessings which come to us from the Lord have one intention. They are to be passed along to another. For as God said to Abraham so long ago, **“I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”** (Genesis 12:2) And that’s what it’s all about. We are blessed to be a blessing...

Do you believe that?

Amen and AMEN!