

“I Will Not Let You Go”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
October 21, 2007 - the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
and Based on Genesis 32:22-31 and Luke 18:1-8
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

When you think of spiritual formation, what do you think of? Do you think of those things, whatever they are, that draw us closer to God? I do. I think of the spiritual disciplines—of prayer in any one of its many forms, of reading your Bible, either as a form of study or as a *lectio divina*, a kind of sacred reading. I think of the practice of *examen*, of searching out one’s conscience in order to discover those areas that need further growth and healing. I think of establishing a Rule of Life for one’s self, an ordered set of times, that is, much like that proposed by St. Benedict in the 6th century, which guides us through the day, the week, the month, and the year, and does so in conjunction with other pilgrims. I think of all these things and more, and I conclude that we do them in order to achieve intimacy with God and with one another. And then I read the lessons for today, and I think, “Good grief! What if God does not want to be intimate?”

Is there a spiritual formation that does not pursue intimacy as its chief goal?

Our lessons describe three persons, each of whom may have wanted a closer relationship with God, but when they sought him out, they encountered something else altogether: distance and silence and even enmity. I’ll begin with the last example first, the publican, as he was known in older translations, ‘tax collector’ in our’s. In Jesus parable, he is the man who went up to the temple to pray, but not for insight or a personal revelation, much less warm fuzzies, but for mercy. The man was convinced he was a sinner and therefore subject to God’s wrath. He feared God—and I don’t mean ‘the fear of God’ as in ‘an experience of God that produces an overwhelming sense of awe and reverence in the believer.’ I mean he was afraid of what God was going to do to him. He was afraid God was going to punish him for missing the mark. He knew what God required. The law told him as much. And he knew he did not meet those requirements. And he was terrified of what might therefore be his fate. Nevertheless, he went up to the temple to pray. He had no where else to turn. If his life was in God’s hands, then he had to petition God for mercy. Did he do so in the quiet comfort of his home, a cup of hot coffee near-by? Hardly. He stood in the temple far off, not even daring to look up to heaven, and he beat his breast and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And Jesus said he went home justified.

In the parable, the publican was set in contrast to a Pharisee who sought to exalt himself. So no one here is saying, “Lord, I want to be close to you.” Still, I wonder what Jesus would say about someone who wanted intimacy with God but was not especially interested in confessing his sins. And that beating one’s breast stuff! How vulgar!

I am reminded of a Peter DeVries novel that opened with a minister calling the

local zoning commission to complain about a billboard newly visible from his window. “And what does the billboard say?” the minister was asked. “Jesus Saves!” he thundered!

The second example is the woman who wore out a judge. If the publican met a God who terrified him, this woman arrives only to discover a God who is AWOL, absent. He appears to be a God who is silent precisely when he should be speaking out—speaking out LOUDLY against the injustices the woman has suffered. “Where are you, God?” she says. “Why do you not come to my aid?” She is very, Very UPSET! Of course, the woman is addressing a judge who lived “in a certain city who neither feared God nor had any respect for people.” But Jesus did not shrink from the analogy. As with an indiffer-ent judge, so with an apparently indifferent God! Persistence is required. But, “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” Jesus said. “Will he delay long in helping them?” He will, we must conclude, if we do not cry out to him day and night—if we do not wear him out with our nagging persistence! The inference is astonishing. God needs our resolute attachment to justice if he is going to act justly for our sake! If we grow lax in our judgments, God will grow lax in his.

The third example concerns the patriarch, Jacob. Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, he is the third generation to walk in the way of God, or to try to, at any rate. What he encounters is not wrathful distance, or silent absence, but a close encounter of the wrestling kind. In our lesson, Jacob is returning home after twenty years spent securing a wife and wealth enough to establish himself and his family for years to come. There is one obstacle to his homecoming, however. He must face up to his estranged brother—enraged brother, would be more like it. And how did his brother, Esau, become estranged / enraged? By Jacob himself. Years ago, Jacob stole Esau’s birthright and the blessing that would have naturally fallen to him, the eldest son, save for the wily Jacob aided by his conniving mother. On the day that his feeble-eyed father decided to bestow the family blessing, Jacob dressed up as his woodsy, outdoorsman brother and tricked his father into giving it to him instead. It was a blatant deception. And Jacob knew it. Indeed, he left home in search of a wife, it is true, but fleeing for his life as well. For Esau had vowed to kill him. And now he was returning home with all his family and servants and flocks to this same brother who was coming to meet him with four hundred armed men!

The night before it all took place, “a man wrestled with [Jacob] until daybreak.” The man was, as tradition has it, an angel. Jacob thought he was God. When it was all over and he had won the wrestling match, Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” That’s the same “and yet my life is preserved,” by the way, that the publican felt after his prayer was answered. What do you suppose Jacob would have done had he known that he was wrestling God? I suspect he would have done the same thing the story has him do: he would have gone on with the wrestling. Jacob, in a very real sense, did not have a choice not to wrestle! God—or the man-angel who came to him in the night—had initiated the wrestling match! Oh, Jacob could have said, “No, no, God, that’s not the sort of closeness I had in mind. I was looking for intimacy, you see. Really, this wrestling business is...how shall I put it? Too rude. Crude. I had

something more tasteful in mind, if you please.”

Well, I’ve got something with more fiber in mind, God said. Put up your dukes!

But it was a wrestling match, was it not? What is there about wrestling that God would want to initiate such a contest with Jacob?

Wrestling is intimate, all right, but there is nothing cozy about it whatsoever. It is not smiles and gentility. It is heart-pounding strength, and stubborn opposition, and the use of one’s wits on the spot in the most fearsome of settings—up close and personal! It is the application of years of training, of clever moves, not for the sake of destroying your opponent, that is, killing him, but for the sake of prevailing against him, of making him bless you, declare you victor against his will. Like the woman in the gospel lesson, when you wrestle, you wear your opponent out. He has exhausted his resources for denying you your goal. And does that make sense when we’re talking about God? Is it really possible for God to exhaust his resources in a wrestling match? Well, no, not God. But the man-God, the angel or whoever it was (the Bible uses the Hebrew word for male here), he could be worn out. If you had sufficient resolve and strength, you could prevail against such a divine-human being.

But why on earth would God want to initiate such a match?

Because what we’re up against demands it. We live in the midst of powers that want to destroy us, powers within us and powers outside us. Those within us want to take hold and steer us away from the path God has set. They are enticing and they even appear reasonable. But there end, as the book of Proverbs repeatedly reminds us, is death. The powers outside us are no less determined, although they tend to be anything but subtle. For they represent those persons who are angry that we should set ourselves apart by our determination to walk in God’s way. How dare you set yourselves above us, or apart from us, or you refuse to worship our gods, they say. And they show their hostility in keenly felt ways. We may protest that the path we have chosen is open to them as well. But they will reply, “I would rather be a king in hell than a slave in heaven!” And you have to admit, their logic has a certain force to it—until, that is, you admit as well that you, that we are all sinners, that we need the mercy of God, that we demand the justice of God, and that we’re prepared to stand up for our rights should God himself stand in our way!

And having done all this, we will be spiritually formed and we will stand.