

Sermon: The Struggle is Real

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Sunday, August 6th, 2017
9:00am Worship
Lyons First Presbyterian Church
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

Scripture for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

Genesis 32:22-31

Romans 9:1-5

Struggle Amidst Blessing

My whole life, I have spent summers on Sodus Bay. In fact, our family is now on the fifth generation of those who have spent their summers on the Sodus Bay. What a blessing.

But this summer, those living near the shores of Lake Ontario—including Sodus Bay—have been suffering high water. As the Lake waves pummel our shoreline properties, we wonder what sort of battle we are suddenly in the middle of. Folks are scrambling for permits to bolster their defenses—the sandbags are not cutting it anymore. Large stone is being brought in to cause the waves to break just a little bit earlier, but it is readily observable that a truckload or two of stones the size of popcorn machines really makes only a temporary gain. We face the reality of a force that we may not be able to overcome, and lose heart. In times like these, those who have the luxury of entire summers on the water can spiral into anxiousness, and survival mode—the aspect of blessing clouded over in their eyes.

In other parts of the United States, or of the world, we frequently are given images of natural disasters that can be difficult to empathize with. We can appreciate that people are not having a good time when we see news video clips of cars being carried away down the street by flood waters, but it is often difficult to personally connect with what the victims are going through.

One of the ways that we respond to the tough times others are going through is to give of our own resources, or to pray. Another is to attempt to relate through humor. An example of such humor—an example that is very real to me—is this: yesterday, a boat shed was knocked over by the Lake Ontario waves and sunk into Sodus Bay. Today, someone might bring a boat over to the dock alongside the sunken shed, and the roof being visible above the waterline, share a picture to Instagram with the hashtag #TheStruggleIsReal. Dock, boat, & then a roof, all in a row.

It is kind of funny to see a boat at roof level of a building. And in the end of the day, a shed washed away is not a terrible tragedy. It is just a thing that can perhaps be rebuilt, if the land it was standing on ever returns. In our relating to the incident with humor though, we should remember that for someone, there is a real problem.

¹Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, August 6, 2017, the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/8/6/>

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We use humor to cope with our own challenges as well. If you have spent much time on social media such as Facebook, you may have seen other examples of the use of this hashtag, or label, #TheStrugglesReal. In some cases, it is used to emphasize the little everyday struggles that many people face, and can share as a common experience—like mopping the kitchen floor and then immediately afterward the family pet with muddy paws dashes through the room. It is very often used in parenting. Imagine this before-and-after scene. First, a neatly organized cupboard full of Tupperware containers. What a thing to behold, a real accomplishment! To be able to open a cupboard without lids and things falling out, or even more, to find a container and lid that match without sifting through the entire lot—that is award-winning housekeeping right there. But here's the second image... a toddler opening up that well-organized cupboard and pulling out everything all over the floor—#TheStrugglesReal.

This phrase is further taken to humorous extremes, such as a photograph of a car's fuel gauge on empty, then another photo of the same car at a gas station with a "CLOSED" sign, and a road sign in the background reading "NEXT SERVICE STATION 136 MILES." A ridiculous conundrum, but probably a situation that someone has actually been in—#TheStrugglesReal.

Humor can be a healthy way of dealing with challenges we face in life. But we ought to be careful about confusing it with solutions. Being out of gas 100 miles from the next fill-up—or muddy paws on a clean floor—might be something we can laugh ourselves out of. But real life does bring real problems. And real problems can lead us down lonely paths. The more life experience we have, and the more gray hairs that appear, the more likely it is that each one of us has at some point been in a place of struggle that was a true battle. Like ongoing, crashing waves, the struggles people face can cut much deeper than a four-word catch-phrase.

Fighting the Hand of God

In the Bible, we often think of Job when it comes to someone facing a lifetime of struggle. The history of God's relationship with humanity in the Bible is full of people facing challenges though, because that is what real life is like. Jacob is our example from Scripture today. Upon revisiting the text, we will see that for Jacob, the struggle was real. And we might also be able to learn something from Jacob's epic wrestling match that we can apply directly into our lives, or the way we interact with others'.

The first two verses of our reading from Genesis Chapter 32 are explained by understanding what Jacob is moving away from, and at the same time what he is moving toward.

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok ("yabboq"). ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

It is interesting to pause and point out clever literary aspects to Scripture—here we have just read the name of the river being crossed with a "ya"-sound... Jabbok pronounced as "yabboq,"

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which would have been much closer to the original Hebrew. In the same way, Jacob's name with a Hebrew pronunciation would have been something like this: "ya'aqob". So in verses 22-23 the household of "ya'aqob" is crossing the "yabboq." While the meaning of Jacob's name is nuanced differently by the Old Testament scribe in other parts of the story, here it is understood to mean "the one who strives with God," or the God-wrestler. And as often follows in the symbolic naming of places in the Bible, the Jabbok River means something like "the place where God is striven with."

But why was Jacob, heir to God's promise of land and fruitfulness, sending his wives, their maides, and his children with them across this river, which would be the site of wrestling with God?

Jacob, having spent fourteen years serving his Uncle Laban in exchange for the hand of both of Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah, had fled during the night. Before reaching the Jabbok, Laban actually did catch up to Jacob, which eventually resulted in a covenant between the two to be able to coexist in the future without causing further harm to one another. But nonetheless, what Jacob was moving away from was strife with one group of people, one side of his own family. And what he was moving toward, held little hope of any less strife—at least in Jacob's mind. He was moving toward his older twin brother Esau, the one from whom Jacob had deceptively stolen the birthright inherited through their father Isaac, son of Abraham. At that point, Jacob thought he was marching into no less than armed conflict with his brother. He had sent his entire household ahead of him, his family last, and himself last of all.

Then we move to to the next verses:

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Who was this man that Jacob now found himself fighting on the bank of the Jabbok? Remembering the meaning Jacob's name and the name of the river we have already considered, Jacob's opponent turns out to be a divine being, a representative of God. Jacob is fighting God, and does not know it. Jacob the fighter is so strong that this divine being cannot overcome him, even with Jacob's hip out of joint.

The divine being apparently needs to end the fight by sunrise, so the wrestling match comes to a resolution:

²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

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The blessing, in this case, turned out to be an amicable meeting with his brother Esau, the one whom he saw fears because of the past wrongdoings Jacob had done to him. Out of a very dark place—a deep, deep struggle very real to Jacob, things got turned out better. God was with Jacob to help him, despite Jacob's blindness to God's presence.

Looking for God With Us

Earlier in Jacob's story, God had spoken this to him, in Genesis 28:15:

"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

Jacob lost sight of that, and found himself in a place so lonely that he could not recognize God made tangible to him.

This is the most important thing to walk out into the world today, remembering that God is with *You* and will keep you wherever you go. It sometimes certainly does not feel like we are being kept by God's protective care at all times—but that is one of our great spiritual struggles as humans. We have to work on believing it, because God reveals to us in Scripture that it is true.

Where in your life are you fighting God, and do not know it? When in the past? Look out for it in the future.

Jesus teaches his disciples to minister to the the sick, poor, oppressed—all those who may be becoming lost in deep struggle.

Sometimes this is us.

When it is us, we must remember to look for God's presence, because God has promised to be with us through it all. When it is not us, we are charged by the head of our Church, Jesus, to be helpers, and point to God's presence. Not one person struggling is outside of God's presence. Not one person is so deep in a hole that God's blessing cannot penetrate it. But we must remember to look for God, and not fight alone. We may just find ourselves fighting the hand that has come to deliver us.

Yes, #TheStruggleIsReal, and so is *God With Us*.

Amen.