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ROMANS 8:18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

GENESIS 32:22-32

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until day break.

When 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. Then the man said, "Let me go for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

So the man said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying: "For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved."

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

THESE THREE: Part II

HAND IT OVER!

Genesis 32:22-32

Romans 8:18-25

We love to fight, don't we? There is an element in human nature—originating as the fight or flight response to danger—that has never evolved out of us. It's good thing too because we still need it at times to assist in our survival. And whether we are fleeing or fighting, it gives us an adrenaline rush. Which is perhaps why fighting is so compelling and why if we do not have something in front of us to lock horns over, we will invent it. We pray for peace, but spoil for the fight. We may have formally concluded a horrendously contentious, nearly two yearlong political campaign, but boy oh boy, we are already in Round Two. And with a president who thrives on conflict, you can hear the continuous beating of the war drums.

Months before the election took place, syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, a psychiatrist by training, accurately observed, I believe, that it is going to be at least a decade before Americans decide who we are as a nation. That is how long it will take to have a rollover of generations which automatically signals a change in values. In the meantime, we are going to slug it out. One populist movement will inevitably give rise to another. And it is not just us. Nearly every Western European country, currently Denmark, is having the same struggle.

And if the truth be known, even if we complain about it, a part of us loves it. It's fun to fight. I am aware that I am speaking as a male, but I can assure you that when I refereed girls

varsity basketball, I witnessed bloodshed! Conflict gets the blood flowing; it energizes us and gives us a cause. It also gives us someone to hate—whether it be the Pittsburgh Steelers or ISIS. But though we like to fight, we hate to lose. The last thing we want to do is throw our hands in the air and cry out in defeat, “I give up!” “Uncle” is not a word that easily crosses our lips. So while brawling may be fun, it is utterly self-defeating. If we could restrict it to football, it would be fine because we do need harmless outlets for our impulse to fight. But rarely is it contained in such a civilized manner. And my wondering is whether there could be a deeper spiritual issue involved. Is it just about our fighting with each other or is all of this conflict actually an external manifestation of our fight with God?

Welcome to Part II of our three part Lenten series which is based upon Paul’s 13th chapter to the Corinthians in which he extols the three pillars of the Christian life—faith, hope and love. In Part I, we explored the nature of faith which in essence requires us to put a Blind Trust in God for the fulfillment of promises made for the future. Our text was Hebrews 11:1: *(Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.)* Our premise was that everything visible—the entire material universe—must have its origins in what we cannot see—namely the mind and imagination of God. So since we do not have a crystal ball, we must place our faith in the future based upon what we can already see.

Have you noticed that in our three New Testament passages thus far—I Corinthians, Hebrews and Romans—that faith and hope are inextricably linked? Why? Because both require us to believe in future events we can only imagine which leaves us with considerable room to doubt. We cannot have the certainty that “seeing is believing” affords us; hence the need for a Blind Trust. In the same way, hope requires us to sacrifice our need for control. To give up control, we must stop fighting and hand control over to someone else...namely God.

Hand over control? Not willingly. The last time I said, “Hand it over!”, I was addressing my cat who had just arrived on the back porch with bird in mouth. He was most reluctant to oblige me and needed a little persuasive jaw opening. Hand It Over! are words demanding us

to surrender. And who among us readily agrees to that? For doesn't it mean we are about to give something up whether it be our wallet to a thief or our driver's license to a police officer who just pulled us over? Forget about surrendering—including to you, God!

The timeless story of Jacob's wrestling match with the unidentified man—presumably a manifestation of the divine—is a wonderful allegory for our own struggles with God. Jacob is as persistent as we are in our never-say-die attempts to exert our will over God's. The match was headed to an exhausted draw when Jacob's adversary finally ended it by striking Jacob on his hip and dislocating it. (He should have been whistled for a flagrant foul on that one!)

But the ensuing conversation between the two highlights the struggle for control. As a condition of his surrender, Jacob insists the man grant him a blessing. Fair enough. If I am going to give up the fight, I want something in return. Note, then, that the man asks Jacob his name. It is important to understand that knowing another's name gave you power over them. What's in a name? A lot! But Jacob acquiesces and then receives a new name, *Israel, for you have striven with God and have prevailed.*

But watch what happens next. In an attempt to level the playing field, Jacob politely asks, *Please tell me **your** name.* And the man refuses. Yet, Jacob is rewarded for his perseverance with a blessing. And do not underestimate the power of blessings in the biblical literature. A divine blessing represented a promise of good fortune, salvation, health and well-being every bit as much as a curse guaranteed evil would pay you a visit.

You will note—and this is significant—that Jacob never actually gives up. If we think of surrender as losing—our egos will rebel. In spite of his permanent injury, Jacob could not admit he lost. He needed to save face. But to receive that blessing he had to admit that his adversary was more powerful than he. You don't seek a blessing from someone weaker. So rather than giving up, what he really did was hand control *over* to God.

There is a huge difference between *handing over* and *giving up*. And in accepting the blessing, Jacob was conceding his need for God's presence and guidance. And so must we

because isn't it really an illusion that we have control over our lives? If we did, why would we bother to carry insurance? As the old joke goes, "How do you make God laugh? By telling God your plans."

Is it a good thing or a bad thing to hand over control of our lives to God and what does this actually mean? We learn from Jacob's struggle that fighting with God is exhausting and while on some level we undoubtedly need to do it, we also have to know when it is time to stop. Sometimes we have to literally slam into the wall of our limitations, dislocating our hip as it were, before we can give up the fight. One of the central premises of Alcoholics Anonymous is that you cannot begin to heal until you can admit that you have no power over your addiction and that you must rely upon a Power greater than yourself to gain and maintain sobriety. And it is almost exclusively the case that you cannot take that step until you hit rock bottom.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could reach a point in our spiritual development where we could accept divine control over our lives without fighting about it? Why can we not simply make ourselves open to the Spirit's guidance without trying to dictate where that will take us? In other words, why do we have to know the destination before we begin the journey?

It is faith that leads us to hope. Once we let go of what we do not have control over anyway, we are liberated to be who God made us to be and go where God wants us to go. If it is in hope that we are saved, it is not by any actions we take on our own account.

But our egos still must be convinced. Our egos create our carefully made plans and our routines and try to satisfy our needs to be liked and value the acquisition of wealth over our compassion for others, our prejudices and biases that favor us while leaving crumbs for those who are not like us. How much of this can we let go of in the firm conviction that we do not need them to be happy and fulfilled people? Our liberation lies not in defeating God, but in handing our lives *over* to God. Trusting what we cannot see is difficult for we would love to control it all. But if we wish to be free, we must surrender ourselves to the Spirit and quit fighting to satisfy our noisy egos. Sometimes we have to be shaken up, to see our plans

trashed, to go through that night of wrestling and to hit the wall of our limitations before we reach that point where we grudgingly hand over our lives and begin to accept the tenacious God who will never stop pursuing us. Sooner or later, this happens to all of us and later will always be of painful than sooner.

Fortunately, the good news is that a blessing will surely follow. It is in that hope we are indeed saved. So..HAND IT OVER!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap March 19, 2017