

Confirmation Sunday - May 18, 2014
Gen 32:22-31, Ps 118:1-2 & 14-24; Jn 20:11-18

Grappling and Letting Go

This is my favorite Sunday of the year here at Boone Methodist. This is my third time through confirmation, and when I started here you confirmands were in third grade. You were cute children and I couldn't remember your names. Now you're sixth graders, twelve going on 25, you're young women and men, and you're models of faith for the rest of us. When I go around and confirm each of you in a few minutes you will feel the whole church leaning in to bless you. You will feel the weight of your mentors and prayer partners and parents on your head. You will feel in your guts what this church has always stood for: we exist to bless the next generation. In our values we call it Next Generation Now. Y'all don't have to wait till later to lead. Y'all lead the rest of us toward Jesus now. Now that's a weighty responsibility. Don't worry, the weight of your family and mentors on your head will be even stronger.

I'll preach this morning in sections. In a moment two of our confirmands will read from Genesis and from Psalms and I'll preach briefly, then confirm half our confirmands. Then another will read from John and I'll preach again. I know it sounds like a nightmare—two sermons. But as the bible is always telling us don't be afraid. Instead listen for God's word in scripture.

Genesis 32:22-31

22 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. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 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." 29 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the Easter people of God, **thanks be to God.**

As we meet Jacob he is on the run for his life. He has swindled his dim-witted but strong brother and his father-in-law one time too many. He sends his whole family away to keep them from danger and he is alone in the dark. And he is attacked by a stranger in the dark. And he is afraid.

Jacob shows why you are embracing faith in Jesus today confirmands. Why we, the church, think the whole world should embrace faith in Jesus. Not for times when everything is perfect. Not for when you're being a good person. But for when it's dark and you're afraid and you know you're

not a very good person. A study of the faith of America's teenagers came out a few years ago. It found something surprising. Teenagers didn't reject faith. They just didn't understand it. That is, most teenagers thought being religious was a good thing. But what they mean by that is that God is nice. That we should be nice. And that it doesn't much matter what religion you choose as long as its nice. The authors of the study call it moralistic therapeutic deism.¹ God is there to make me happy.

But what about when its dark and all is lost and you're terrified? Nice doesn't help then. That's when a God who got crucified might come in handy. You're not alone in the dark ever. Those hands on your head signal the hand of the Holy Spirit that will never leave you. And even when you're not nice and the world isn't nice God is good and will save you when you *don't* deserve it.

²Jacob wrestles with a man till daybreak. I saw a wrestling match between App and Duke this past year. It was a little different than the TV wrestling I grew up with. Two great athletes grappled on the mat and in 60 seconds they couldn't breathe they were so exhausted. Imagine that all night when you're sure the other wants you dead. When the man sees he can't win he puts Jacob's hip out of joint. Ouch. But Jacob will not let go. The man is afraid because the sun is coming up. What is he, a vampire? ³Listen to Jacob's words: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Here's the blessing. You are no longer Jacob but Israel. You have wrestled with God and have won. Jacob asks the wrestler's name and he refuses to give it.⁴ Now its clearer it's not a hit man Jacob has wrestled with, it's an angel, or even God himself. And Jacob's not even Jacob anymore. He's Israel. One who wrestles with God. What if when you kneel in a few minutes I looked into your face I said, hey, you used to be called Jake, Carsyn, Shane, but you're not now. Here's a new name. I bet your parents would put my hip out of joint.

Here's the point of the story. God wrestles with us. Wounds us. And we won't let go. No matter what. That's the promise you make today. That you will wrestle with the God of Israel and will never let go until that God blesses you. We're a long way from nice now. We're on about a God who wounds us and gives us life. Who knows our name and then changes our name. Who will bless us if we just don't let go.

We can't even imagine all the pain that is coming in your lives confirmands. You will be wounded. That is certain. Middle school and high school are painful when they go perfectly. Kids are cruel as well as kind. There will be things in life you want so bad you'll feel like life is over not to get them. And you won't get them all. You'll try out love. And it will hurt too. Sometimes it will heal, it will be so beautiful you feel alive like you never have. And then it will hurt again. This is why our whole church leans in to bless you. We know what's coming. And it will be really hard. It's why we parents wound you. We don't mean to. We just want you to be safe more than anything in the world. Put your seatbelt on. Be back home by 10. Never get in the car with someone drinking. Because we love you so much we want your good and would give our lives in a second for yours.

¹ Moralistic: be nice. Therapeutic: God is there to make me feel happy. Deism: God does nothing else.

² http://jesusistheword.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Jacob_wrestling.jpg

³ Gen 32:26 on screen plz

⁴ <http://psnt.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/jacob-angel.jpg>

Here's what today says. You've already been wounded. By Christ. He's wrestled with you and put your hip out of joint. You'll limp a little forever now. We don't have to worry about your being wounded. You already have been. And God has given you life all over again. You can tell us parents to calm down. Someday you'll come home having done something we can't believe. A tattoo. Something pierced that shouldn't be. Clothes we can't imagine. An instrument we'd like to melt down rather than listen to. And we'll freak out. We will, that's our job. And you can say, hey, you already did something weirder to me than this. You baptized me. Had me confirmed. Married me to Jesus. That's the weirdest thing that'll ever happen to me. And the best.

Here's our charge to you today. Wrestle with this God. Be wounded by him. And he'll give you life. Change your name. Make you limp. And make you holy. We are way past nice now. We are on about a dangerous God who mugs people in the dark, submits to wrestling with us, who uses villains and crackpots and hypocrites like us because that's the only kind of people available. And who will never let you go. He'll be with you when we can't and with us when you can't. Life with this God is not easy. Like life with you or each other. But it is profoundly beautifully heart achingly beautiful. Thank God. Amen.

Child what is your name. Do you believe in Jesus? Will you worship him in his church forever?

John 20:11-18

11 Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping, Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'." 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them he had said these things to her.

This is the word of God, for you, the Easter people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Well first things first, apparently Jesus never got the memo that women shouldn't be preachers. Here Mary Magdalene preaches the first Christian sermon ever, "I have seen the Lord." And Jesus coaches her up right before it, say this, not thing, do this, not that. She's the first confirmand, the first seminary student, the first pastor. If Jesus was against women preachers we'd have never had this story. Women confirmands you can do anything you want and I especially hope you'll preach, maybe have my job one day.

We Methodists baptize both infants and adults. We do it because both say important things about God. If we only baptized babies then baptism would seem like a baby ritual, cute, but not

important. If we only baptize adults we'll think baptism is about our understanding, and it's not at all, it's about God's mysterious saving work. This is why we baptize infants and serve communion to children. Who can understand God? None of us! If we wait till we understand no one will take communion and no one will be baptized. God saves us when we don't deserve it and we'll never understand it. But it's also important to baptize adults as we did yesterday, blessings Macy Howarth who was baptized along with daughter Carsyn yesterday. Because it shows God still converts people. Christians are made not born. We all have to be converted again and again. Here's a danger. We expose our kids to religion. But we *teach* them baseball. How to hold the ball, the glove, what to pay attention to, do it again, a 1000 times, get it right. But with faith we say eh, just turn up once in a while, don't take it too seriously, let them choose for themselves. Just shows we don't really care about it. We teach with intensity what we care about.

I preached before about God wrestling with us, wounding us, blessing us, changing our name. Here in John the name comes up again, Mary. She does not recognize Jesus until he says her name. This text is part of our series of encounters with the resurrection. Jesus isn't just raised in some sort of magic trick. He's raised as a down payment. We will be raised too like him by his Holy Spirit. Confirmation is a little resurrection. It brings to life what was not in us.

Lots of cultures have coming of age rituals. These usually involve danger, fear, elders, and becoming a woman or man. Nelson Mandela's home village had the boys all circumcised as teenagers. The boys' job was not to move, not to wince, not to act like it hurt at all. To succeed was to be a man. To fail was to remain a boy. What does our culture give for coming of age rituals? Video games? A cell phone and a Facebook account? Here's why that village did that. They needed to know they could count on Nelson. That he could be wounded and yet be courageous. We need each of you confirmands. You will be wounded. And like Mary Jesus knows you by name and loves you.

Our confirmands show the rest of us what we value. Ask Hard Questions our value says, and do these teenagers ever do that. How can Jesus be God? Does the Trinity make sense? What happens to you if you die and don't believe in Jesus? Why are there so many good people who aren't Christian and so many Christians who aren't good? They show us all what we should do. Ask a hard question. And be ready for a hard answer. Because God has some questions for us. How are we living our lives? Are we ready for the coming judgment? If someone watched our life could they tell we were Christian, or do we just look like consumers like everybody else? Here's a hard question. In the early church if you wanted to be baptized the church would go interview your neighbors. Hey, do they seem like people who can meet the living God and not die? And if the neighbors said no, they just seem normal, the church would say no. Could we stand that sort of question?

The confirmands know my answer to these questions. The first is, "I don't know." That has to be the answer. It's God we're talking about. If we understood God entirely it would be an idol. St. Augustine says "If you understand it, it is not God." Socrates said the first thing to learn on the way to becoming wise is that you know nothing. We Christians say that's always true of God whether we're an infant or wiser than Socrates—no one understands God. So, confirmands, everyone, says it with me, if you understand it, **it is not God**. Two, the answer is always Jesus. I take this from the children's sermon story, where the preacher asks "what's gray and fuzzy," and the kids all squeal

“Jesus!” and one says, I don’t know, sounds like a squirrel. The kids are right. The answer is always Jesus.

Here’s a hard question. Why does Jesus tell Mary “Do not hold on to me?”⁵ This is one of the most often depicted moments in Christian art, by the way, as Jesus heismans his friend to keep her away.⁶ He gives this explanation, “Because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Well that clears it up, thanks Jesus. Do you see how the answer is always “I don’t know,” and even when the answer is Jesus that leaves us more confused than before? It’s God we’re talking about. If we’re not confused we can’t worship. But we are, so we can, that’s good news!

Too much in this passage for one day and we’re out of time, so let’s try this. In Genesis Jacob wrestles with the angel and has his name changed, his hip wrenched out of joint. He wrestles with God and wins but is wounded, and for the rest of his life when his hip hurts he’ll remember God’s strange way of blessing people. Mary wants to hug Jesus, to wrestle him, to take him in her arms and never let go of him again and he says no, lemme go, don’t hold on to me, no no no. Jacob holds God tighter than we can imagine and Mary doesn’t even get to lay a finger on Jesus. Weird, right? I don’t know what to make of it. I do know this. As children we get held onto and wounded. Our parents hold us too tight, we want to shake free, especially as teenagers. They wound us. Jaylynn and I joke we’re preparing our kids for future copays when they need therapy for what we’re doing to them. We don’t mean to, we can’t help it. Your church will wound you. We will get things wrong. We will hurt you. We would never do it on purpose. It’s just what happens. The family and the church are the place where we get our name and where we get wounded. Both make us who we are. But then we get let go. We’re on our own. And there’s no one to hug. I remember sitting in one of my first apartments, no one there, wondering if I died how long it would take for anyone to find me. We’re on our own, really on our own. And if we haven’t wounded you then, given you a new name, let you know who you are, given you a limp, well, we’ve done it wrong.

The world can be a crushingly lonely place. It’s not interested in who you are, where you came from, your name, or your youth group even. It’s just interested in your wallet, what you can produce, how handsome or beautiful you are. Superficial and deadly things. When you’re out there, when you’re on your own, when we can’t get to you to help you or hurt you anymore we hope you’ll remember. I am baptized. I belong to Jesus. I am part of the church, I’d better find one here quickly.⁷ I am like Mary, reaching out for a savior. I have seen the Lord. And even if I can’t hold on to him now I will love him forever. That’s what it means to be confirmed. To be Christian. To be alive. To be human. Amen.

Child what is your name. Do you believe in Jesus? Will you worship him in his church forever?

⁵ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Noli_me_tangere.jpg

⁶ [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-RfuDVvQ7HnE/TbdQXEKRV_I/AAAAAAAAJzk/m4A4v4EMK4Q/s1600/Giotto di Bondone-Scenes from the Life of Mary Magdalene Noli me tangere detail-1.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-RfuDVvQ7HnE/TbdQXEKRV_I/AAAAAAAAJzk/m4A4v4EMK4Q/s1600/Giotto_di_Bondone-Scenes_from_the_Life_of_Mary_Magdalene_Noli_me_tangere_detail-1.jpg)

⁷ <http://deaconchris.files.wordpress.com/2007/10/orans.jpg>