

“Don’t Let Go”

Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21; Genesis 32:22-31 - Tesa Hauser
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California - August 6, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be open to receiving a word of hope this morning. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

How many of us in the room were taught to ride a bike? Do you remember teaching the children in your life how to ride a bike? I don’t really remember how I learned or which of my parents taught me to ride a bike without training wheels, but I imagine I was afraid in the process. Like anything new or foreign, the unknown can be scary. What do you want to hear from the person teaching you to ride, and what do you say as the teacher? “I am here with you, I won’t let go until it is time.” It’s great to know that you have someone in your corner who believes in you and wants the best for you.

That is somewhat where we meet Jacob in the Genesis passage. This passage is puzzling to many, and scholars have tried to make sense of this situation where a mysterious figure, who we find out is God, is wrestling Jacob all night long. We know Jacob was alone to start, but other than that, no details are provided about what happens before the wrestling match begins. Scholars suggest that Jacob may have first thought it was Esau, so he wrestles without question. At some point, though, Jacob realizes that it isn’t his brother and there is a reason for this situation,

and eventually, that it is divine. In the verses prior, he asked for God's help and protection, which makes God's response even more confusing.

Before we dive deeper into this passage, I want to provide some context. The passage is in the middle of a family reunion. Jacob is heading back home after being instructed by God to do so, to the land promised to Abraham and Isaac, his grandfather and father. Going back home means reuniting with his twin brother, Esau. The last time they were in contact, Jacob (whose name means "heel-catcher" or "supplanter" to usurp or seize power) tricked his own father, with the help of his mother, to take Esau's blessing.

Esau is the oldest twin and should have received that blessing. It's a sad story, but when he found out what Jacob had done, he wanted to kill him. So the accomplice, Rebekah, their mother, sends Jacob to her brother for safety and to hopefully find a wife. Then, Jacob gets tricked into marrying two women by a man who claimed him as his own flesh and blood. As Tolstoy said, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Very true of this family.

Jacob is terrified; he doesn't know what to expect when the last time they were in contact - Esau wanted to kill him. I must admit that I am on team Esau, even though it seems like Jacob was meant for all that happened anyway. That's a different conversation at a later time. So in the story, as the sun begins to rise, the "man" realizes it's time for them to go and tries to stop Jacob by striking his hip

area. It doesn't stop Jacob at all, instead, it seems like he holds on tighter and will only let go if he receives a blessing.

You see, Jacob has now put himself in a very dangerous situation. If wrestling God wasn't already dangerous, there is a possibility that he might see God face to face. How many people have seen God's face before? No one has truly seen God's face, not in all of its glory. It's too dangerous, and people won't survive, scripture tells us. Jacob is aware of this but feels like he is already running towards death with a potentially angry Esau. If that is his fate, why not ask for a blessing and potentially see God's face?

God is impressed by Jacob's tenacity and decides to give him the blessing through a new name: Israel. The name Israel in this section means God strives or the one who strives with God. As one commentary I read noted, "God's giving this name, then, has implications for God as well as for Jacob. It affirms a divine commitment to stay with Jacob in struggle. God will be caught up in this relationship. God's promise (28:15¹) involves not a passive presence, but an active, engaged relationship."

We don't meet this version of God often, the one who physically wrestles with humans, and there are preconceived notions of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, Psalm 145 notes God's response is well within God's

¹ "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

character. God is compassionate, gracious, and merciful to all. God is slow to anger and is the ultimate sustainer and provider. God is just and has committed to us, as he did to Jacob, to never leave nor forsake us. However, as the commentary shared, God is an active participant in our relationship with us. This is documented in the scriptures, and how we respond matters to God.

I don't think we'll have to wrestle God like Jacob did; I believe he is the last person to physically wrestle God. Not metaphorically though, we wrestle and struggle with life, and sometimes we wrestle with God, even if it looks different. Prophets, kings, and even Jesus in the garden at Gethsemane wrestled with God. There are times when we don't let go. When those wrestling matches occur in life, don't let go of the promises of God, don't let go of hope, don't let go of asking God to bless us and the ministry we do. I am sure Jacob's arms and legs were trembling, he was up all night wrestling, after all. His brow filled with sweat, and his leg is now hurt, but he persevered. It may feel hard and scary to hold on, but don't let go. Don't let go until it is time.

There is a children's book story that shares the story of a father teaching their daughter how to ride a bike. The daughter is scared and is constantly saying, "Don't let go!" At some point, she finds her balance and the courage to ride on her own and asks her dad to let go. Watching his daughter riding her bike without help, there is a moment where he realizes he isn't sure if he's ready to let go of his little

girl. He's watching her grow up right in front of his eyes, and it's scary. He admits this to his daughter, who shares she'll hold on until they figure it out together when's the best time to let go. We don't know their future, but I like to imagine their relationship continues strong and they figure it out together.

We know that letting go is necessary and important. Letting go of fear allowed the little girl to learn how to ride her bike. Letting go allowed the dad to realize his feelings about his child growing up. What they didn't let go of was each other. Hope for the future, strength to go on, and perseverance is found in holding onto one another. For Christ-followers, it means holding onto God, believing, knowing, and even asking God to hold us as God has promised. As Psalms 145 says, "The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts all who are bowed down...The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does...The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." How good is this news?!

In Friday's devotion, I shared from Romans 12, and how we are instructed to zealously care for another and with fervor bring hospitality to the stranger. Don't let go of what has been asked of us; hold on tight to being a beacon, a light, salt to the earth. We are to care for all of creation, for God does not have compassion only for humanity but on all that God has made.

With all of that in mind, I am asking that we let go and don't let go. Let go of perfection, let go of comparison, let go of what could have been, and let go of what is getting in the way of doing God's work in the world. Take a few seconds to think of what is in the way. Tradition? Fear? Uncertainty? Lack of creativity? Our own biases? Let us work together to figure it out and work through it.

On the other hand, don't let go of bringing your gifts to this community; let's work to share those gifts and strangers. Don't let go of loving and caring for one another; let's work to share that love and care, with strangers. I believe it is in those moments that we get a glimpse of the face of God. As contradictory as these two things may be, they live together for this time and place on earth and in history. Let us ask for God's blessing as we let go of the things in the way and hold onto the promise, compassion, and hope God brings. Alleluia and Amen.