



SUNDAY SERMON

Christian Identity

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 18, verses 1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Why don't people vote? That's a question addressed in a recent op-ed by Adam Grant, professor of management and psychology at Wharton. Grant was not addressing the recent dismemberment of the Voting Rights Act—an important topic for a future sermon. Rather, he wrote: "To secure the right to vote, Americans have been beaten, jailed and tortured. Some even died. Yet in the 2012 presidential election, less than 54 percent of the eligible population turned out to vote. That's 93 million people who didn't bother to weigh in on who would lead our country."

One explanation, says Grant, "is that for many people voting has little to do with their identities." In a recent study, "instead of asking people to vote, psychologists asked people to be a voter. That subtle linguistic change increased turnout in California elections by 17 percent, and in New Jersey by 14 percent. Nouns are more powerful than verbs. When I think about voting, I can skip it and still see myself as a good citizen. But when I think about being a voter, now the choice reflects on my character. It casts a shadow."

Intriguing how our actions become our identity. And our sense of identity inspires us to act in certain ways.

This dynamic is at the crux of our story today about Jacob. So also, it is at the crux of our identity as those who seek to follow Christ, as Christians. Do my actions make me a Christian? Or does being a Christian inspire me to act in certain ways? I believe the answer is yes. Today I want us to think deeply—once again—about our identity as stewards and givers – as those who—with great gratitude—care for and use well all that we have received, and who understand our identity as generous givers.

What's in a name? Jacob is a complex character. A trickster and operator, his name, Jacob, is derived from the Hebrew word for "heel." It means "supplanter" or "cheater" and describes well his early identity. He was chosen and blessed by God, yet started life by deceiving his father in order to steal his older brother, Esau's birthright. He got what he wanted, but as a result had to flee from his people and his land, to make his way as an alien. There, despite mistreatment of his future father-in-law, he married and prospered.

In time God sent word to him to come home. As he does so, he learns that his brother Esau is coming to meet him. Fearful of a quite understandable revenge, Jacob contrives to offer many gifts, to pave the distance between them, smoothe over potential rough spots. While on the way, he had a dream. And there encountered an unknown wrestler in the night, a stranger. The text is ambiguous. He wrestles with an angel perhaps, or even God. Limb against limb in the dark. "Who are you?" he

Continued

DATE

The Twenty Second
Sunday after Pentecost
Sun., Oct. 16, 2016

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

READINGS

Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 121
II Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

demands. "What is your name?"

What does Jacob receive? A blessing from this midnight wrestler, and a new name: "you shall be Israel—which means, "one who strives with God." With this, his hip is put out of joint; a blessing, a new identity and future, and a wound to remember always. In the morning, he and Esau are reconciled; a broken relationship now renewed for life in a new land. Through God, Jacob, now Israel, is a new person, given a new identity—and is henceforth inspired to act in different ways—as father of a new nation.

And you? What is your name? What name reflects your true identity? I am Ledlie, beloved-child-of-God, Ledlie husband of Sarah, son of Ledlie and Roxana and their lineage before them, father of India and Nicholas. I am Ledlie, bright and creative, some days. I am Ledlie, small and afraid on other days. I am Ledlie who accomplishes things of which I feel justly proud, as I am Ledlie capable of being small, mean, in need of forgiveness.

And you? Is your name and identity today, the same as when you were a child? Have wounds and blessings, encounters with God, changed and renamed you?

Our nation is wrestling—is it not?—in this dark night of the soul, as all manner of shadow parts of ourselves—the prejudice, mistrust, ignorance, and fear—rise and find voice in our public arena. Who are we really, as a nation, as a people? Must we submit to our smallest selves? Or will the spirit of the living God call forth from us the capacity for open hearts, generous compassion, and care for the least among us?

Beloved, our word, our action, our witness is needed now more than ever. The life and ministry we share by grace in this place—of prayer, community, mutual support, and generosity of spirit—is needed in our world.

It is common today for people to "shop" for a church. We want a church that is near, that offers what we seek be it—community, music, something for our kids, a way to serve others, the sacraments. That's well and good. But the time comes to decide, to commit, to move from consumer eyeing the goods, to participant who's all in, who says the church is not them; the church is us; it is me; I am in. Follow me, said Jesus, and at first they trotted along wondering if he was the messiah; in time they—we—become no longer tag-alongs, but are the very body of Christ. Today I hope many of you will take this step and quite literally step forward to be welcomed into this congregation—as a new member, or as one returning and newly committed.

In so doing, we take our place among the community of saints—past and present—who, having received much, also gave much and give much. We say "yes" to God's gifts and invitation; "yes" to bearing witness to God's grace. Central to our Christian life is the affirmation that we are stewards—that is, managers, care-takers, life-givers—of God's creation. We do not possess, we do not own. We are stewards—of creation, our abilities and creativities, our possessions, our power, stewards of this church and this city.

In my life, living toward God's promise and learning to trust God is tied very closely to what I do or do not do with my money. I am seeking to become the generous person I believe God desires me to be.

Twenty five years ago, I experienced a turning point, literally a conversion—not in a dream; rather through some simple math. All I did was add up the total dollar amount of the gifts I had made that year—gifts to the church, to my schools, to other organizations—and then calculate that number as a percent of my overall annual income. While I had indeed given here and there along the way, I found the total of my giving was a miserable 0.0002 percent. The curtain pulled back, revealed I was not who I thought I was. I was thrown by this truth about myself; "this is not right; I have been blessed with many opportunities and I am a generous person, at least I want to be; it's important to me to give, to be a giver."

This started me down the path, each year giving another percentage point more, such that today I gladly tithe - give ten percent of my income—before taxes—to the church, and give more to other organizations.

It feels good; in truth, it feels holy, authentic. For me, giving is a spiritual discipline. I do not give to the church so the church can do spiritual work, important as that is. I give because giving is part of my spiritual work. We are made in God's image; God is a giver—and so am I, so are you. For me, the giving came first and the understanding followed. That's why the sequence of Jesus' statement rings true for me: "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." We tend to say, "First, I'll get my priorities straight, then I will give more." Jesus says, "give, and you will get your priorities straight." Our actions shape our identity; our identity inspires our actions.

I know that many of you have discovered for yourselves the spiritual sense of abundance that comes through your own giving. Because that simple math changed my life, I'm sharing it with you; just this week, I sent you the same worksheet. It is not simple, this life of faith to which we are called. I continue to wrestle with what I need and want, what I want to spend, what I want to own – also what I want to give. I've found that God meets me in that struggle and invites me to trust.

Ledlie, you worry about so many things, says God. Consider the lillies of the field, the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

You know that old refrain, "the best things in life are free"? I've found it doesn't mean what I thought it meant. I thought that meant you could have the best things in life for nothing. Things like love, grace, and all that. That's wrong. When we say "the best things in life are free" it means, you can't keep them. You can't hold on to them. You can't even spend them. But you can give them—and then they are free, even free to be part of your own life. Blessings upon blessings upon you, this day and evermore.