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Community Church of Sebastopol
October 20, 2019
Text: Genesis 32:22-31
Title: Wrestling Out A Blessing

Today we are taking a break from our journey through the Gospel of Luke and spending some time with a different part of the lectionary. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures finds us with one of our earliest faith ancestors, Jacob. Here we meet Jacob on the cusp of a major change in his life. Jacob is alone at the river, a liminal place between his past and what lies ahead. It is in this in-between place that we are told Jacob wrestles.

We don't know what exactly he was wrestling with – his own angels and perhaps demons - but whatever it was, we are told he did not let go until he received a blessing. What is it like to come face-to-face with God and receive a blessing? In the case of Jacob, perhaps in all of our cases, to come face to face with God and receive a blessing is to be understood and celebrated, named and even renamed as our truest self. In this in-between place, after a great wrestling, wounds and all, Jacob emerges renamed “Israel” and as such, makes a way for a people who would become more than they could have imagined.

Church, our world is in a great dealing of wrestling right now. I don't know about you but I have been wrestling with the three LGBTQ cases that the Supreme Court has been hearing this month. I have been wrestling with the uncertainty of unguaranteed rights. I have been wrestling with who gets to decide who is deserving of protections or who is not. As I prayed with today's scripture, my prayers turned again and again to Aimee Stephens.

Aimee Stephens is a 59-year-old transgender woman from Michigan. A few years ago, after much wrestling, Aimee came out as transgender to her boss and informed her colleagues that she would begin presenting as herself, as a woman at work. After coming out, Aimee was fired. Aimee's former employer still believes firing her was the right thing to do, despite lower court rulings declaring it illegal for Aimee to have been fired. Aimee's case is now before the Supreme Court becoming the first hearing directly addressing the constitutional rights of transgender and gender non-binary people.

I don't know Aimee. I don't know what all she had to wrestle with, or what she had to hold on to until she could be known by her true name and live into that blessing by coming out to her colleagues. I can imagine the fight though; the daily struggle of hiding one's belovedness, of presenting one way in public all the while knowing God has called you by a different name. I wonder in what moment she faced God, what moment she recognized the face of God in herself, in what moment she heard her new name, and how that moment led her to demand the blessing that she deserved from the world.

Aimee's fight has become a fight for the safety and flourishing of all queer, trans and gender non-binary people. It is our queer communities who live precariously while the court battles through their decision and it is our queer communities who will suffer the

most if the court does not grant us protections and rights. Aimee's fight is also a fight that could bless the whole world. Every time one of us is called by our true name, the boxes that limit and oppress who God has called us to be lose their power. It is worth our wrestling, as a community, with the limitations gender has placed on us, on all of us. Not only might we receive a blessing, not only might we come to know our names in new ways, but I would argue that our God of justice and love requires this wrestling of us because our queer, trans and non-binary kin are beloved children of God who may just help us become more than we could have ever imagined.

One way that queer and trans communities have tried to give voice to this wrestling and to the power of being called by names that reflect our belovedness is by inviting people into practices of sharing our gender pronouns. For example, at the beginning of a committee meeting, you might be invited to say your name, followed by whatever pronouns you feel best articulate your gender identity. Often She/Her/Hers are the pronouns used by folks who identify as girls/women, He/Him/His by folks who identify as boys/men, They/Them/Theirs for folks who desire gender-neutral pronouns, and the list goes on.

For some, this practice can feel uncomfortable or unnecessary. If that's you, I invite you to wrestle with it, and to see what blessings might come from it. For some, this practice is life-saving, because it means we get to share with you how we are best and most fully known, without the risk of being outed or misgendered. I believe that, in the midst of all of this possibility, all the different ways we might be truly know, there is blessing. When face-to-face with God, the possibilities of our identities, of our true names, are inexhaustible.

I remember the year when I first heard my true name. It was 2010 and I had recently cut my long hair to the length it is now and had given myself permission to stop wearing dresses in favor of more masculine clothing. I was out as queer with regards to my sexuality, my politics, even my faith life, but I had very little language for my gender identity. Then a new friend of mine, who identified at the time as androgynous, began calling me "bro" and that naming felt like coming home to myself. It was a word that I had heard used among straight, cis-gender men, meaning men whose birth sex matched their gender identity and expression. Yet, when we said "bro," it felt like we could begin accessing ways of being that we had been told as girls and young women, were not meant for us. At times I have used "They/Them" pronouns for myself, but ultimately She/Her pronouns felt more authentic to me. Yet I have struggled with the box that society places around the words "she" and "her." Bro seemed to be a middle way, an in-between place that allowed me to disrupt what it meant to be a man or a woman. I wanted to dress like a man and cry in public and speak and move from my sensitive heart places. And I wanted to honor every part of me that is a fierce woman who loves women, despite every effort of patriarchy makes to destroy that love. So I became a person who identifies as she/her and bro.

You see church, there is so much in a name. There is so much we can discover about God when we wrestle for a blessing, when we create spaces where we can perceive as God

perceives, and safely and bravely share the truth and stories of our names. This is the blessing that the one who became Israel through the wrestling, received from God. This is the blessing we can receive through our own wrestlings, whatever form they may take.

Our church is just beginning our Stewardship Season, our season of Gratitude and Generosity. Many of us are faithfully wrestling with how we are being called to financially give voice to our gratitude for this community. When I consider my giving, I pray on the mission and visions of ministry that a community holds and embodies. One of the many visions that I am grateful for in this community is our ongoing service as an Open and Affirming Congregation. Some 20 years ago, our community committed to honoring, celebrating, welcoming, and deeply affirming the identity and expression of all people. In doing so, we declared that this is a place where every name is beloved, every name is a blessing, every name is the face of God.

As you faithfully wrestle with your giving, consider what it will take for this church and this world to be a place where Aimee and all trans elders can finally, after so many years of wrestling, finally be called by their true name. Consider what it will take for our youngest ones to grow up in a church and a world that is dedicated to their expanding, where every expression is a Divine expression. Give to that. Give to those possibilities and don't let go of the wrestling until those blessings are made manifest. If Jacob's story teaches us anything, perhaps it is that from our faithful wrestlings, a whole new world can emerge, starting with the blessing of knowing one another by our true names, as beloved ones who have seen the face of God.