Sermon for the Funeral of the Rev. Randal K. Gullickson

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First English Lutheran Church

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Texts for the day: Genesis 32:22-13, Psalm 8, Romans 8:31-39, John 1:1-4; 10-14

*Genesis 32:22-31*

*22The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25When 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. 26Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.*

“Did you know that that is my story. Because the name Gullickson means son of *Gudlikar*, which is wrestler or the battler!”

This was Randy, just a couple of months ago, poking his head in my office following worship one Sunday. Randy was part of a team of folks here at First English who craft bible studies for our kids here, based on the lectionary. The kids go downstairs during the lessons and the sermon and work engage the same scripture reading that I’m preaching on up here in what we call “big church.” Because he never came to the committee meetings, we always gave him the hard assignments. Given his time at Lutherlyn, we figured he had the expertise to do what he could not. So when the story from Genesis of Jacob wrestling with a man who was also God came up in the lectionary this fall, we kicked that story straight to him.

Anyway, Randy came in, and sat down, and we talked, for at least 45 minutes (anything with Randy always took at least 45 minutes), about Jacob and the man who is also God and the wrestling and the night. We talked about why a relationship with God often feels like wrestling. We talked about the story’s context, how Jacob was a brilliant man, but often at odds with the people around him. We asked questions. Why is it that wrestling happens in the night, in the deepest darkness when you cannot see God’s face until daybreak? How can we teach our youngest kids that it is ok to struggle with God and ask God questions? What do we make of Jacob being the one who struggles with God and human beings? And finally, why is it that God seems to lose?

Now, any of you who worked with Randy know that once he adopted a project as his own he was all in. The project could be big, like transforming a camp or designing and building his own house. Or it could be small, like designing a fifteen-minute lesson plan for his congregation’s children’s church. Whether the project was large or small didn’t matter. Once the project was his, it was his. He came back in the middle of the week again poked his head in the door and said, “I’m still thinking about Jacob,” and stayed for 45 minutes. and then caught me at coffee hour the following Sunday and said, “Ok, Jacob and the kids.”

Then he and Tracy departed for Switzerland and France. And then he came back before he had planned, because he became suddenly very ill. And on the day when it became very clear to Randy and to the doctors just how sick he really was, I went to the hospital and stuck *my* head in *his* door and he said, “Come in and sit down, because I want to talk about wrestling with God.”

And today, I think we should take that cue, and let’s talk about wrestling for a while. Because Randy’s death has been hard news, sudden for some of us gathered here, and there’s some struggle in this room today. I do not know exactly what it is like for you right now, but today, I can feel the grief at his loss and the gratitude for his life, for his work, tussling in my heart. Randy was clear that he wanted today to *feel* upbeat—in fact, he at one point said he hoped that we would dance out of here—but it is hard to dance when it seems as though the air has been squeezed out of your chest. Today, I can sense the absurdity of cancer, of cells that pummel other cells out of existence, in this universe that God created. When we consider the heavens, the work of God’s fingers, the moon and the stars that God has created, how we consider that in the beginning was the Word and that in God’s word was life—LIFE!--how utterly incongruous these death-dealing cancer cells are.

The church preaches that faith does not give us a pass out of suffering but redeems it. The God of life deals with suffering and death by sending his Son to stand with us through it, in solidarity on the cross. We say all the time. Randy preached it, as have many of you; believed it, as do many of you. But some days that conviction sneaks up on you, grabs you by the throat, knocks you to the ground. And when it does, pushing back and wrestling with God seems like a reasonable thing to do. Randy knew this. He lived it, with his first cancer at 39. It was why he was glad to claim Jacob’s story as his story, Gullickson name or not. It was why one of his chief ministries was walking with youth and young adults as *they* wrestled with God and humans, with faith and calling and with who God made them to be.

At the heart of every wrestling match with God are questions, spoken or not, about who God really is and what God’s intentions really are. Wrestling with cancer or with grief, or with relationships hurt and relationships mended are these questions (Randy asked them): What are God’s intentions towards us? What is God’s endgame? What can we really know about God? What may we hope? It is interesting that the story of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok happens at night, when Jacob is alone. This “night” in Genesis was not the night as we now know it in Butler or Pittsburgh, aglow with thousands if not millions of artificial lights that make the outlines of faces visible even at 1 a.m. This night was the night as it is experienced at *camp*, where you only have the moon and the stars and where without a flashlight you cannot see three inches in front of you. So Jacob wrestles with someone he cannot see until daybreak, when the still hidden sun bathes everything in soft light.

But in that light Jacob’s wrestler turns out to be not nearly as imposing or menacing as he, or we, might expect. This God who snuck up on us in the night does not seem to have the power to prevail, at least as we often think of prevailing. This God’s power is not the power to overwhelm or crush. Rather, this wrestler has the power to bless and to name. Jacob. Israel. Gullickson—son of Gudlikar, the battler. Your name. Mine. Those of you who worked at Lutherlyn have a tree cookie with your name on it. Many of you are wearing them today. Isn’t it an amazing thing to have someone pay attention to your name?

And what of God’s endgame? At the end, the risen one will return and call us by our names.

For Jesus has wrestled already with death. He lost to it, but in the losing, he defeated it forever. What may we hope? His victory is ours. God raised him up and will raise Randy and will raise us too. In the soft early light of Easter, the face of Christ can be seen and God’s intentions revealed: forgiveness. Reconciliation. Healing even when there can be no physical cure. A calling reclaimed. Words of love spoken and bread and wine shared and baptismal water poured. Whatever the wrestling in the night, at daybreak on Easter, the God is revealed in the face and hands of the risen Christ. God was never against us. God is for us, through it all.

When went over this service in great detail for the second time (because he was, to the end, a camp director and a program planner and a pastor), Randy said, “Tell them that I fell into God’s arms.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.