

19th Sunday after the Pentecost
October 16, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob stood alone. He wrestled all night against a man with no name. Some claim it was God. Others claim it was his brother, Esau, although not physically Esau, rather Jacob's obsession with him. Still others claim it was Jacob's conscience. Dwelling on the specific identity of the man, though, overlooks the significance of Jacob's struggle. Just before daybreak, the man struck Jacob on the hip and gave him a new name, Israel.

Jacob got to this place having stolen Esau's birthright and their father's blessing, Jacob feared what was to come as he approached his meeting with his brother. He also could not turn back having enriched himself by tricking his father-in-law Laban and in so doing raised the ire in Laban's sons.

This was Jacob's existential crisis. Knowing he could not return to Laban and fearing his meeting with his brother, Jacob stood alone. Not just physically alone, spiritually alone, too. He had no place to go.

I'm guessing the news this morning that Rev. Sackett will not be your designated pastor is an existential crisis, too. Instead of no place to go, what are we supposed to do? Who will lead us now? What does his withdrawal say about us? What's next?

Do not take his withdrawal as a commentary on you. You are a congregation who has gone through a long journey to arrive at today and likely hoped that a vote next week would have been the beginning of the end of a long night. Through that journey you have wrestled mightily and did not fail. I know you are a different congregation than you were when I arrived almost three years ago. Three years ago, you were wounded and uncertain about yourself and your

future. Today, you have confidence and most importantly, you have a glimpse of what your future could be. Though you may not realize it, that vision coupled with clear, measurable objectives sets you apart from many congregations seeking a pastor right now. Typically, congregations seeking a pastor want that pastor to grow the church membership, which in turn will boost its finances. When you read between the lines, you read about a church wanting to hold on to what it has without any strategy for its future or measurable objectives.

Regarding pastoral leadership and knowing that my time with you will soon end, the board of officers will meet next week to discuss plans to cover the pulpit for the next several months. We will be in touch with our area conference minister, the Rev. Terry Yasuko Ogawa, to find a pastor who can serve you while the search committee resumes its search. Coverage would most likely be a supply pastor or a bridge pastor.

Let's not forget, though, that since the end of 2020, you have had monthly lay led services, which have demonstrated that you are more than capable as a congregation to cover the pulpit. That's an essential step to being the church.

That, being the church, answers what's next. It is what you are supposed to do and be. Being the church is to be the body of Christ. Those congregations wishing to grow their membership implicitly see the pastor as their savior. The pastor as savior is their stand-in for Jesus, except the pastor is not Jesus. The church, not the pastor, is the body of Christ. The church is the incarnated Christ manifested through its ministries.

The long struggle that has been your journey has also been an important part of your transformation. Those conversations in meetings that raised initiatives for next year showed a clear shift in outlook and direction. Even activities, such as last year's craft fair and this year's

trunk sale, pointed to a reorientation. The former raised money for a community cause. The latter offered an outlet for the community. The shift has happened.

The existential struggle churches, not just Southampton, have now is practically universal. Declining and aging membership, stretched finances, and aging buildings dominate many discussions and meetings I have with colleagues. Curiously, however, this discussion does not take place among clergy under 40. They have only known the church in decline. While we can lament the church's decline, we should be more like the under 40 clergy and spend more energy answering "what do we do?"

The answer is "be the church." Being the church means facing the wider community's new reality.

An example. We have many second homeowners in Berkshire who come for the weekend. Recently, I was meeting with one congregation. They noted that among the few people who come on Sunday morning sometimes includes second homeowners. Those second homeowners come enough that they congregation knows them, but not enough that they can be considered part of the congregation. We know that Sunday morning worship is a terrible time for weekend visitors when you factor in typical weekend getaway activities in the Berkshires: Saturday night performances, Sunday brunch, and pack the car to return to the city. I asked, "Why not shift worship to late Saturday afternoon?"

Another factor is post-modernism. Today, having the pastor stand before a congregation every week to expound upon a topic for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes is kind of like wearing bell bottoms. Our worship right now is not much different than worship a hundred years ago. The world has changed a lot since then. We nod to postmodernism with our fourth Sunday at-table worship.

Be the church. The church today should not be the church of yesterday. The church today should look towards the church of tomorrow. You have struggled for a long time and in so doing have set your vision upon the church of tomorrow. You've worked hard already. However, you're not there yet.

Though there is more work ahead, you have already taken the most important step, turning toward the church of tomorrow. The work you've already done has strengthened you to prevail in your struggle as the night is not quite over.

Your pledge today will fund the ministry to become a center for community life. It will fund your ministries to shift you from being seen in this community exclusively as a church to being seen inclusively as a community asset.

Here's a wondering question, although one that I'm not urging you to undertake, but one that neatly connects this Jacob story to you. At the end of Jacob's struggle with the unnamed man, the man gave Jacob a new name, Israel, because he had striven with God and prevailed. What if this church became known not as the First Congregational Church of Southampton, but the First Congregational Church for Southampton?

Do not worry. The Holy Spirit will bring you a pastor. Dispel any notion that you are at fault because you're not. Step back and look at all you've accomplished and how far you've come because it is worthy to celebrate. Finally, look with hopeful confidence that the Holy Spirit will lead you to be the church that God called you to be.