Sunday, October 21, 2001
DON'T GIVE UP TOO QUICKLY
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

Jacob, the second son of Isaac and Rebekah, is one of the genuine heroes in the Hebrew scriptures and is one of our ancestors in religious faith. He was an individual who did not give up too quickly. He was persistent. Lest you misunderstand, persistence is not always a good character quality in and of itself. For example, to persist in the practice of a bad habit that causes harm to yourself or others is unwise. Smoking is only one example. To persist in a belief that has been proved false is also not very smart.

However, persistence — refusing to give up too quickly — can be a very good character quality. It is a virtue when you are doing something worthwhile, when you are working for a just cause, and when you are trying to learn a new skill that is helpful to you and others. It can also bring a sense of accomplishment to your life because you did not give up until you reached your worthwhile goal. Persistence is also a good character quality and a necessary virtue in the practice of prayer and in strengthening your spiritual life.

Jacob was persistent in working toward the goals in his life that counted. Here are two examples. When he was a young man, he deceived his father Isaac and his brother Esau, so he had to leave home and live somewhere else. His brother had threatened to kill him. While living with a relative named Laban, he came to love one of Laban's daughters, Rachel. He cared for her so much that he agreed to work seven years for her father so that he could have her for his wife. When the seven years were up and it was time for the wedding, Rachel's father tricked him and, at the last minute, substituted his first-born daughter Leah in the marriage ceremony. It wasn't until the end of the ceremony that Jacob realized he had married the wrong daughter.

Being a persistent individual, Jacob agreed to work another seven years if he could also have Rachel as his wife. One of the most beautiful comments in the whole story of Jacob and Rachel is made by the narrator, who says: "So Jacob served seven more years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." Now that's persistence.

Here's another example from the life of Jacob that demonstrates his persistence. Now that he was married to two wives and had eleven children, Jacob decided to return home after being away for twenty years. His hope was to make peace with his brother, Esau, but he was not sure whether or not he would be forgiven and welcomed by him. Jacob sent messengers ahead to let his brother know that he was coming home. He also sent gifts to his brother to let him know that he was coming seeking peace and forgiveness.

The night before he was to meet his brother, Jacob had trouble sleeping. It was a time of wrestling and a time of blessing. The Bible describes it as "wrestling with God," which is another way of saying that he was wrestling with his fears of the future, with his conscience, and with what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life.

Isn't it true that some of our greatest conflicts and struggles are internal? Our most powerful enemies can be within. Wrestling with God is coming to grips with ourselves. It is facing what we prefer to flee, admitting what we'd rather deny, letting the long-separated, alienated parts of

ourselves have it out with each other. Every time you struggle with discovering your true purpose in life, you are wrestling with God.

If you are at mid-point in life, you too will wrestle with such questions. Many of you have already done so. You begin to wrestle with the meaning and purpose of your life and what you should do with the rest of your life. Jacob had made his fortune, built his empire, but there was still something missing. He remembered some of the shortcuts to success he had used and was not proud of them. He knew that he had done things to deceive himself and others. He wondered what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life. This story of Jacob and his wrestling with God tells us that eventually our self-deception, our denials, and our dishonesties catch up with us, and we have to face the truth.

Someone once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” It is at the most pivotal points in your life that you meet and struggle with God. You enter into a kind of wrestling with God at those moments. You could find yourself in a difficult marriage. What is the best way to deal with it? You might be dealing with a debilitating job or caught with no job at all. Should you quit your job and change vocations? You could be struggling with a child who has gone astray. You could have health problems that consume your energy and resources. You could be at the point where you know you have to make a major change in your life.

In the earlier stages of his life, Jacob had developed an “escapist” strategy for dealing with his problems. He attempted a spatial solution to difficulty — that is, he would turn tail and run when anything threatening appeared on the horizon. This is a strategy we all use at some time in our lives.

The most important lesson you can learn from Jacob’s wrestling that night is that this time he did not run, and he would not give up until he had worked it through. In religious language, he would not give up the struggle until it became a blessing.

Earlier in his life, as I mentioned before, when he had a difficult problem or decision facing him, instead of struggling with it until the right solution was found, he simply ran from the issue. Now, he showed that he had learned from his mistakes of the past and that he was ready to make changes in his life and in the way he dealt with difficult issues.

He now accepted the fact that in many crucial situations, the only way out is the way through — that good news comes from facing up to the bad news, not running from it. Jacob was no longer an escapist. He moved from being an evader to a facer-upper, and the end result was that he was blessed. A new quality emerged in him, which is seen in his words, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” In other words, “I will not let go of this experience, of this soul searching, of this inner struggle, of this wrestling with God until I have learned from this struggle what there is to be learned.”

Sometimes we let go too soon, we give up too quickly, before we have learned what can be learned. Some crises in our lives are so earth-shaking that we try to get away from them too fast, and then we allow the experience to be wasted.

The story in the Bible tells us that during the struggle, Jacob was injured. His hip was wrenched from its socket. He walked with a limp from that point on. There is symbolism in this injury. Why his hip? It is significant that Jacob, who was “on the run” in most of his young and adult life, who made his way in the world by less than pure means, could no longer run. His injury became his blessing. He could no longer run from his past, from himself, or from God.

Jesus knew the story of Jacob and his persistence. One of his parables has this same theme of not giving up too quickly. It's about a widow who was seeking justice from a judge. Like Jacob, she would not give up easily. According to the story as Jesus told it, at first the judge paid little attention to her case, but she persisted day after day. She refused to give up because she knew her cause was just. Eventually, the judge gave in, heard her case, and decided in her favor. Her persistence paid off.

In this parable, as in the story of Jacob, the Bible is telling us that it is not enough to be passive and do nothing and then hope to be inspired or have the right answer magically appear. We need to struggle, and persistence is necessary in the struggle.

I have a book in my library with the one-word title, Inspired, and the subtitle, The Breath of God. It's a book of interviews with gifted people about the origin of their faith and inspiration. Without exception, the people interviewed are hardworking and passionate. They do not give up too quickly. When they associate their creativity with God, they do not claim that God creates for them — sometimes through them, but not for them. They all have struggled, have wrestled with problems as did Jacob. They contend that God's Spirit works best when they are working. God's Spirit would serve no purpose if they were not engaged, in the same way that wind would serve no purpose to an anchored sailboat. Even when you lift the anchor, it is necessary to hoist the sails.

One very creative person interviewed said: "To work on a book, to write, is for me very much the same thing as to pray. Both involve discipline. If the artist works only when she or he feels like it, that person is not apt to build up much of a body of work. Inspiration far more often comes during the work rather than before it."

All writers, composers, and artists of all kinds say that discipline is necessary for creativity and inspiration. There are many times when they do not feel like writing or composing or painting or practicing, but if they waited until they felt like it, if they waited until they felt inspired, inspiration would never come. It is because they are in motion that they are able to be moved.

Struggle and persistence through struggle are also necessary for continued spiritual growth. Those who give up too quickly do not grow and mature mentally or spiritually.

But how do we strengthen our persistence? Many people with staying power have their lives connected to something greater than themselves. Staying power is most often associated with the experience of being captured by a great idea, a just cause, something to which you can give your loyalty — a worthy goal to be achieved. For example, Jacob's love for Rachel gave him the staying power to work for another seven years so that he could have her for his wife. And later on, when he was returning home to reconcile with his brother Esau, he was able to persist in his struggle with himself and with God because he would not give up until he had learned what he needed to learn.

The same was true for the widow in the parable Jesus told. She knew her cause was just, and she persisted until justice was granted.

If I can be personal for a moment, the one thing that kept me going in earlier years when I began my studies to be an ordained minister was that deep down, I was convinced God wanted me to be a minister, and it was also something that appealed to me as a life's vocation.

That goal, that sense of fulfilling God's purpose in my life, gave me the persistence to work my way through four years of college and four years of seminary.

In the various churches I've served during my almost 45 years of ministry, what has kept me going in times of difficulty is the same sense of purpose. In January 2002, I will begin my 31st year of ministry here. With that kind of longevity, you can see that I am not a person who gives up too quickly. I continue here because I believe there are still a lot of goals to be reached for this congregation and that I can be of help in achieving them.

Another way to build persistence so that you don't give up too quickly, in addition to having your life connected to a higher purpose, is to break through your quitting points.

I'm not a jogger or runner of any kind, but friends of mine who are tell me that the way they build persistence in running is to break through quitting points. Let's say your goal is to jog 20 laps on the track. You've been gradually working up to this over a period of time. By the 18th lap, you think you're not going to be able to jog another yard. You're at a quitting point, but you keep to your goal of 20 laps and break through that quitting point.

Our lives are filled with quitting points, and every time you break through one, you are building persistence. The widow in the story Jesus told broke through many quitting points in her efforts to obtain justice. Jacob, in his wrestling match with God, broke through one or more quitting points and kept wrestling until he received a blessing.

Don't give up too quickly. It is when you persist that you receive a blessing. Amen.