

The title of the message for this morning is: “Don’t Lose Heart”. Not losing heart is relevant to what we are experiencing as a congregation. We are part of a church experience that is revealing our hearts. We are engaged in an ongoing conversation that is book-ended each week by what we hear and do in worship. We share a common experience in worship, and represent a variety of thoughts, ideas, views and opinions, as we wrestle with God about what it means to be a Christian.

There is a book: Leading Congregations in a Time of Testing. The author will be at the annual clergy retreat I am going to attend at the end of this month. Listen to what he says: “Like it or not, religion today is a competitive open market! There is a great competition for people’s hearts and minds. In this changed climate, virtually all of the once-established mainline Protestant groups have struggled to adapt to their new situation and respond faithfully...It is a time of ferment and challenge...it is also a time of testing for these denominations, congregations, and their leaders...Often the testing is severe, as church leaders struggle in the face of steady erosion of membership and dollars. For many pastoral leaders of the once-mainline denominations, despite long hours on the job there are minimal visible or measurable results. Many encounter strong resistance to change. Conflict, dissatisfied church members, and painful personal attacks are common.”

This is not news to me. I became engaged in full time ministry as clergy quit in droves, found other ways to earn a living, or took early retirement, and congregations all over this country closed their doors for the last time because they were overwhelmed by non-denominational churches and some of the so-called television and radio ministries. Churches that tried to compete with such ministries, by mimicking them, experienced similar fates, as mom and pop stores do, when a big box store comes to town. Thousands of members lost their faith communities, and some members lost their way altogether.

It is tempting to follow the herd. It is tempting to go-along, to get-along. It is tempting to let simple feel-good stories of inspiration supplant the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ. It is tempting to turn our holy book into a set of formulas for salvation and prosperity. Anyone who knows the history of Christianity knows that heresy defines such ministries. When we wrestle with God as Jacob did, the promise of God is that we will have sufficient resources to deal with what God asks of us, knowing that for some that may be a lot, and for others not so much, but always enough.

It is tempting to resist the prayers of our founders that call us to confession, because we have enough pain, disappointment, sorrow, regret, and judgment, based on the expectations of others in our lives already. It is tempting to be drawn to a high-energy emotional message that makes us feel good about what we have, more that it makes us think and pray about who we are. In all of this we are wrestling with God, just as Jacob did. We have one foot in the tradition of our faith and the other in our past, or in our homes in front of the television, or pointed in the direction of the closest thing we can find within driving distance, to approximate what we see and hear on television. We are wrestling with God about what to do with this phenomenon that has sprung up all around us in the last half of our lives.

There is an African proverb that says: “When you pray, move your feet.” Before taking a step away from the word of God, let’s pray and think before moving our feet, lest we begin the journey that will take us a thousand miles away from what our faith teaches us to believe. Prayer promises to give us a clue about which direction we are poised to step toward. It matters whether we pray about what we believe and how we are living our lives, or whether we are drawn to those who tell us that Jesus wants us to have all that we have, and that we deserve it, instead of praying about what to do with all that we have, in his name. This sort of prayer takes some up-front and personal wrestling with God.

The good news is that most of us do not have to rid our selves of as much as Jacob did, before going to the mat to wrestle with God about how to live and whether to carry on. In the middle of the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven sons to cross the water. Then he sent all of his possessions across, so he would be alone, unencumbered by the people and the things in his life. It was then that Jacob wrestled with the questions of his faith, his conscience, and his identity. Did he believe? Was he doing the right things with his life and his wealth? Did he know himself to be in relationship with God?

Not everyone has two wives, at least not at the same time, and most of us do not have as many children, or as many servants, or as many possessions as Jacob did. But the message is the same. It is only when we let go of everyone and everything in our lives that we have allowed to define us that we begin to listen to God speaking in ways we can hear. Doing this frees us to enjoy the perspective of our faith that all will be well, no matter what our present circumstance or predicament in this life may be.

‘Letting go and letting God’ means that we can love people even more, and that we will use our resources in ways that make lives better, and that make us feel better. It means that as much as we love others and our selves, we love God even more. It means that we too can come face to face with God and live to tell the story, with our actions as well as our words. It means that we will let God make use of us, and all that we have.

Letting go of anything we have allowed to define and direct our lives, other than our core identity, which is our baptism; our relationship with God as our Creator, and Christ as our brother, is about more than being unburdened by what we possess, and what we do. It means also that we can lay down our prejudices, and our biases, and our opinions, and our views that are in conflict with the word of God.

Scripture says the time is coming when a new covenant will be made. We are living in new covenant times, and have been since the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. We are living in a coming-of-age of religious maturity, when it is up to people of faith to act on what is right, according to our minds and our hearts because we know God in the person of Jesus. When we embrace this reality of our faith we are not only forgiven, we are on the path to salvation moving forward one step at a time, in ways that are consistent with the will of God.

Jesus told the parable of the 'persistent widow' because he wants us to know that God is more 'just' than a judge. Jesus wants us to know that we are to persist in petitioning God in prayer about the things that matter most. We are to pray in ways that shape our lives, in ways that are pleasing to God. We are to resist succumbing to the ways of the world, and the way far too many churches have become. We are to pray that we will become instruments of God's will, by thinking clearly and acting faithfully.

I wrestle with God every week as I prepare to proclaim the gospel in ways that you can hear it, and apply it to your life. My experience in this regard is the reality that pastors and teachers share in the denominations that are faithful to the word of God, and the historic traditions of the United Church of Christ. I prepare the messages you hear from me, knowing that you have your own wrestling with God to do.

I smile sometimes when I hear 'wannabe-preachers' proclaiming that they are the true believers, that their messages are Bible-based and Christ-centered, when I know darn well they are pandering to the masses, who flock to hear only the feel-good parts of Christianity. I am not immune from the discouragement and the challenges that relate to keeping the word of God alive in keeping with my fundamental belief in Christ as the Messiah, and my personal relationship with Jesus as my brother, but I have not lost heart.

Bear in mind that the gospel of wealth and prosperity is a lie. Jacob knew that, or he would not have separated himself from his stuff before coming face to face with God. Christ knew that, or he would have accumulated things instead of being free to meet everyone wherever they may be on their faith journey. Preachers that by-pass Scripture that chafes, and makes us think anew and act anew is a sin of omission aimed at getting people to follow them, instead of walking with Jesus. God wants us to be rich in spirit, wealthy in the peace that passes understanding and to place a value on the abundance revealed in our relationship with God and all people of faith.

The gospel has always been hard to hear. It takes some wrestling with God to hear it. It is scary, but safe, to wrestle with God. Wrestling with God will not kill you. The opposite is true. God does not win the wrestling match, if we lose. I believe that what Paul wrote to Timothy, about witnessing, is just as relevant today as it was when Timothy received his second letter from Paul: "...continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

"All Scripture...is useful for teaching...Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction... For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of the evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

Pretty good advice, I'd say, from Paul to Timothy that has been handed on to us. When I began to read what Anthony B. Robinson wrote about congregations like ours, I was able to say that our congregation is beginning to distinguish it self. We actually are beginning to realize some 'minimal visible' and 'measurable results'. Our members, visitors and friends who worship with us and make the effort, are getting something out of sermons that are an alternative to watered-down, dumbed-down, and politicized-preaching.

To the extent that we sustain our efforts, we will create the opportunity to realize significant results. In taking our new covenant first steps together toward letting people know where we are, who we are, how to find us, and what we are learning ourselves, we will continue to be here for all who long to hear the word of God and to put it into practice.

We are not going to grow in our faith by getting caught up in the trend toward churches that have eliminated, or de-emphasized the reading and meaning of Scripture. We are not going to grow in relationship with each other by ignoring what God calls us to do through the life and teaching of Jesus. We are not going to grow in numbers, enough to replenish and revitalize our congregation by keeping our location and the ministry we offer, a secret.

To the extent I do not employ a formulaic, personality-centered and performance-based approach to preaching, it is because I am here to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and to be your pastor and teacher, in ways that encourage you to bring meaning to the gospel based on your own ability and willingness. Anything that gets in the way of that, or that puts me between Jesus Christ and you, I will avoid to the best of my ability. As you wrestle with God and we carry on the conversation to be in relationship with each other, in this body of Christ that is our congregation, you will see more of me, but hear no less of the gospel.

I know that I am not ever going to become all things to all people. I know it would be a mistake to try. At other times in my life I have been published, interviewed, broadcast, and have delivered messages on most any topic or issue, secular and religious. I have held my own with the best of them. But, different situations call for different talents. We all are living with the fact that our church is not like those you see on television and that are cropping up in residential communities. It would be a mistake for us to try to be like them. In our mutual covenant-based relationship with each other, let's make the most of what we have and who we are, for as long as we are here. God is asking no more, or less, of us. God promises that our resources will be sufficient, providing we realize that what we withhold today robs the future of this congregation, and all who will follow us. Don't Lose Heart. Peace be with you. Amen.

ORO VALLEY UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Rev. James Briney
1401 East El Conquistador Way
Oro Valley, Arizona 85755-6587
October 21, 2007 (10:00 a.m.)

Genesis 32:22-31
Jeremiah 31:27-34
Luke 18:1-8
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5