

Genesis 28:10-17

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder* set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

Luke 16:10-13

'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

“Reaching for Something Higher”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Someone asked me about last Sunday's sermon. It was on Monday morning. Someone asked me about last Sunday's sermon, so I told them what I thought I said that the points of the sermon were poetically designed and illustrated with riveting examples that would etch into the mind in a manner not to be forgotten. And I said, the only thing that exceeded the content of the sermon was the manner in which it was delivered. It exemplified the skill of an orator whose equal has yet to be matched by any expository preacher west of the Mississippi River. The person who asked the question walked away. Now, the truth is, the sermon last Sunday was on hope, and hoping for something more, and it was easy to preach, and one that people would want to hear. Almost anyone could have preached it, but the one today is complicated and difficult, and it's a subject that has to be stated in such a way that, if I do it wrong, it will turn out badly or maybe violently, because I've got to say two things, and I've got to say them one at a time, but they both need to be said at the same time. It is a paradox. No, not two doctors. It's a paradox. It's the merger of the unmergeable. And I've got to get this right, or there will be questions and phone calls.

It's like someone said of the difference between rap music and opera. Opera is people singing when they should be talking, and rap music is people talking when they should be

singing. So there's got to be some singing and there's got to be some talking, and we've got to be able to do them both, and almost at the same time. And what I have is a riddle, kind of like Robert Fulghum in his book, *What on Earth Have I Done?* Get this, he said, "If you imagine that what you fear in the future is already part of your past, your present looks pretty good." You've got to think about that. And he said, "There are many ways to lose your life, and death is only one of them." And he said, "The question is not, 'Is what you have sufficient?' but the question is, 'Are you sufficient for what you have?'" I wish I'd thought of that. But you see, and now here comes the sermon, what I want to say is close to what Alvin Toffler the futurist said. He said, "You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so the small things line up."

Big things and small things. Is what we have sufficient? Are we sufficient for what we have? Am I talking when I should be singing? I should never be singing, so I'll continue to talk. Thinking of big things while we're doing small things. Now, don't blame Alvin Toffler. You could blame me for the confusion, but it's not really my fault. I'm just a humble servant. I just read the script. Jesus wrote it, blame him. He's the one who said, "If you're faithful in a little, you're going to be faithful in a lot." He's the one who said, "Look inside yourself, and look beyond yourself, all at the same time." If you can be trusted in small things, then you can be trusted in great things, and I don't think he made it up. I think it goes back to Adam and Eve who thought, "What difference does it make, it's just one apple," and they ate it. But if they hadn't eaten the apple, would we ever have known what it's like to be God? Or it goes back to Cain and Abel, and the question "Am I my brother or my sister's keeper?" and isn't that what it means to us when we're raising Cain? I think so. Jesus knew about integrity. I mean, he spent 40 days in the wilderness, we're told, tempted. He knew about looking in, and he knew that where your heart is, there's your treasure as well. Jesus, picking up on the theme, telling the leper that he was a child of God. Telling the woman at the well that she had something to give. Telling the blind man at the pool to pick up his pallet and walk, telling Zachias to come down from the tree and act like a man.

Be faithful in a little, because you're able, if you can do that, you can be faithful in a lot. Look in. It's about integrity. Now, every so often, not as often as some of you all, but ever so often, I pay someone to cut my hair, and it doesn't take long, but it happens. And there's a barber around the corner from the church. Some of the men from the church go there, I know because he talks about you. And there's a sign outside the house, and it says Gino's Haircuts, Tuesday through Saturday, 8-12. I've been going there seven and a half years, and Gino and I, you know, we're tight. We talk about life and we talk about golf and we talk about God and we talk about church members. And two weeks ago, I asked him what part of Italy his ancestors came from, did he know? Gino, that's Italian. And he said, "Well, my name isn't Gino, really, it's Gene. And I'm not Italian. And when I first put that sign out there in front of my house, four Italian men came in, and looked at me and said, 'You're not Italian,' and I said, 'No, you're right. But I can cut hair. Sit down.' And they did."

We've got to know who we are, got to be comfortable with that. It's called integrity. It's looking in. I read the story about William Allen White, well-known journalist, strong

Republican, he was sent over to cover the state convention of the Democrats in Kansas. The presider looked over the convention, hammered the gavel calling the session to order and said, "I see no clergy among us, so I'm going to call on William Allen White to open our proceedings with prayer." White rose, he walked to the microphone and said, 'Sir, you'll have to excuse me because I'm really not up to public prayer, and I'd just as soon the Lord not know that I'm here.' It may be we don't want the Lord to know where we are, but we ought to know. Wendell Berry was right when he said, "If you want to see where you are, then you've got to get out of your spaceship." Or your car. Or get off of your horse and walk on the ground. Jesus kept saying, the kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden, and the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant searching for a fine pearl. It's precious. It's integrity. What's it mean? Means everything. We've got to spend a good bit of time looking to answer the questions that life poses us, like "Who am I really?" and "Why do I do what I do?" And "When am I fooling myself?" and "How am I hurting other people?" and "Why am hurting them?" and "What am I doing when I can?" And if we've got skeletons in our closet and we can't get rid of them, at least we can ask them to dance. And if there are things, you know, that we've been doing, that we don't like that we're doing, well, we can stop doing them.

I'm in the middle of a funeral recently, and the family asks that I invite people in the congregation to speak of the deceased, and so I went out into the crowd and a man in the fourth row waved his hand, so I gave him the microphone, and he looked at me and he stood up and he said, "I really wasn't asking for the microphone, I was swatting away a fly, and to tell you the truth, I really didn't know the person, but my wife did, and she says some really good things about her." Now, that's a man with integrity. He said what he had to say, and he didn't say more, and he said a lot about that person who died and about himself. And Jesus said if you're faithful in a little, you're going to be faithful in a lot. It's not impossible, it's expected, to be faithful in a little, and we can be faithful in the little things and know that we can also be faithful in the big things.

Ron Rathbon was right to suggest that if we do not know where we stand, within ourselves, where does that leave us? It's all about mustard seeds and grains of sand. It's all about people who exalt themselves being humbled, and those who humble themselves being exalted. It's all about people who complain about the sins of others and are truly drawn by the regrets that they can't commit them themselves. If we look in, we see integrity. We see who we are, and then and only then are we prepared to move out in humility. Only if we know ourselves, only if we are true to ourselves, are we qualified to reach for something higher. Only if we're willing to reach for something higher will our integrity be put to use.

Secondly, ambition, transformation, transcendence. Once we know who we are, we can strive to become what we have never been, but are called by God to be. Ambition is reaching up. Our faith calls us to employ our ambition as well as our integrity. It was ambition that got Paul the Apostle to speak of the church as the body of Christ. How audacious. It was ambition that motivated Jesus to walk up to those who would listen, and say, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers for a bigger catch, fishers of men and women." It was ambition that Jesus pursued when he said, "The first shall be last." You

see, he didn't tell us we cannot be first, he just redefined what it means to be Number One and suggested we strive for it. We reach for something higher. It isn't easy. It's hard, but it's Christian.

Like the little child in Sunday School, probably Rat Boy, in Sunday School, where the teacher said, "Would you like to have Jesus in your heart?" thinking the little boy, as anyone else, would say "Yes." And he looked at his teacher and said, "No, I don't think so. I don't think I want the responsibility." Well, the kid is right. It's a huge responsibility, and Maya Angelou knew it. She said, "A solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities." When we reach for something higher, we're like Jacob in his dream, watching the angels of the Lord ascend, feeling like that's sacred ground. It's this aspect of our faith, I think, that's missing today. Because I think we have become timid and tired. We have lapsed back into negativism.

The whole nation, I think, is stymied. Rick Mageris, the basketball coach at the University of Utah, not now, but he was. If you know him, he's a large man, and a bold man, and he said once, "My hairline is in recession. My beltline is in inflation, and the way my basketball team is playing now, I'm in depression." Recession, inflation, and depression. In some ways, the worst part of the current situation, in the upcoming elections, is that Robert Frost was almost right when he said, "Politics is an honest effort to misunderstand each other." What I doubt is the honesty. We have come to the point in history when people are telling, are speaking, but nobody's hearing. When negative predictions are the only ones that sound prophetic. John McKay coached the Tampa Bay Buccaneers when they were bad. They were real bad. And he said something about the team once that I'm sure didn't make it any better. After losing yet another game by a large score, a reporter asked him after the game what he thought about his football team's execution, and he looked at the reporter and he said, "I'm in favor of it."

We reach for something higher. Everyone can reach for something higher, can look up. We transcend, and are transformed. I have a book that's written by a man who was paralyzed from the neck down. He could not move. He had trouble breathing on his own. He had to be fed, but he wrote this book, and it was published on his fiftieth birthday. It was published exactly the seventh anniversary from his spinal cord injury. The title of the book, get this, the title of the book was *Nothing is Impossible*, and it was written by Christopher Reeve, "Superman." He writes, "At some time in our lives, and often when we're not prepared for it, something will happen to us over which we think we have no control, and of which we can do nothing. And we may want to quit. But you see, we can't. We have got to find the will to persevere. We have got to find a way to keep going." He did, till he died.

Ambition, to keep going. Transformation, transcending ourselves, we've got to reach higher. We've got to reach higher, to become what we've never been, but are called to be. To do what we've never done, but are required to try. To evolve into the fullness of our being in a way we never imagined, but it's there for us in that moment in time, and when it is our time, and we don't want to miss it. Ambition, rising high.

Someone said to me Friday, "I've got an idea. It's probably a bad idea, but I wonder what you think about it." And I said, "There are no bad ideas." And his idea is a great one. And I thought, "What we need today is more people with ideas, and encouragement to express them." More ambition. More transformation. More attempts to transcend, to reach higher. I love the old Texan who said to his mortician that when he died he wanted to be buried in his rusted-out pickup truck because he "ain't never seen a hole that truck couldn't get him out of." "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. And we are. And we can act like we believe it. When the professor told Marie someday she would touch the stars with her fingertips, it put into her head an idea. And when she married, people laughed at them, yet they wondered, that day in the lab when the petri dish glowed in the darkness, and the Curies discovered radium. And many of us have not missed the benefits of that ambition, if we've ever had an x-ray or a CAT scan. It takes ambition. It requires that we reach higher. See, here's the thing. If all we do is pursue ambition, blind ambition, ambition without integrity is arrogant. On the other hand, if the only thing we learn in life is who we are, we will have achieved a sense of being, but we will have failed to become. Integrity without ambition is self-indulgent.

Let us pray. May God bless you with a curious mind, so that you see deep truth in simple statements. And may God bless you with anger, so that injustice will provoke your calm. And may God bless you with tears, so that important things are acknowledged with the compassion they deserve. And may God bless you with a foolish idea that you can make a difference, so that you will do things others tell you shouldn't be attempted. And at the end of your life, looking back, may you know who you are, and like that person, and may you have reached higher than you thought you could, and may you be surprised at what you have become. Amen.