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“Reflections”

A sermon by Arabella Meadows-Rogers

Genesis 32: 22-30; Romans 14

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I am glad to be here. For those of you who don't know me, I was the Associate Pastor here from 1985 to 1992. It was before computers; there was still a dial telephone in my office. Rebecca Harvard was IN the youth group, not RUNNING the youth group. I baptized Sarah Robinson. I buried Katharine Everett and many others. My children were 3 and 5 when we arrived; I now have grandchildren older than that. So it was a long time ago that I was here.

I stand here in the proud shadow of the long history of women clergy, associate pastors, who have served this church—Marilyn Hedgpeth and Phyllis Kort, Lori Pistor and Mary Banner, Carter Shelley. There were men, too.. but somehow I thought today we were honoring the women!

I stand here in the long line of women who worked with Joe Harvard—Sue Tucker and Marie Truitt and Karen Connally and Jane Blanton, and many others... but that's another sermon entirely!

But mostly I stand here proud to have been named, unwillingly, but still proud, to be part of a group of people who have witnessed to this community about vulnerability and strength, and now I'm thinking about Marcia Goldner, and Linda Postema, and Richard Vereen and Peter Stone and Debbie Long and many, many others.

If you don't know these particular individuals, you've missed knowing real strength.

If you don't know these people, and want to understand the context of my sermon, think about those people who are different because they don't have a choice, but do it with dignity anyway, who witness by their vulnerability to a strength that God calls from them, a strength that most of us would rather not earn, but a strength that is real and trueand it is the presence of that vulnerability that has made this Christian community a special one.

As someone once said about Jacob after his dark night at the Jabbock: “yes, I limp, but that doesn't mean I quit walking”. That's the strength I'm talking about—strength that

tells the truth about vulnerability and in doing so becomes stronger, has more integrity, and offers more to the community.

If you'll pardon my saying so, FPC is justifiably proud of the "greats" who have been in our midst—judges and deans and lawyers and world renowned doctors and people who give to the community so well they get awards because of it. But any community that is known just by that kind of 'great' is not a true Christian community.

Vulnerability and strength. It's a lesson I'm learning daily. It's a lesson I can't help from learning, as living with a terminal disease makes me different, weaker sometimes, more vulnerable, makes me wonder who I am and who God wants me to be during this period of my life. It's a lesson I learn daily when I have to ask for help in ways I didn't before, or when I have to cancel an engagement or bow out of a meeting. It's a lesson that says vulnerability and strength are just two sides of the same coin, and each gains integrity and power by embracing its other side.

But I have to say I'm not fully there yet, as I discovered as I looked at the language of this sermon: over and over again I found myself confusing the pronouns: about them and us, about well people and sick people, about those of us who think we know the answers and those who don't. Them and us. That's why I say I'm not there yet, because in God's best language there are no divisions.

There is no them and us, we are all children of the same God,
 running the same race,
 seeking the same common good,
 hoping for the same long life and best of health.

We are all weak sometimes but want to appear strong,
 wrong sometimes but wanting to appear right,
 scared sometimes but not wanting to show it.

There are no pronouns, in God's language, there are just nouns, and names. We are given names at birth, and at baptism, and God knows us by name. The angel said to Jacob at the Jabbock, "tell me your name". And the blessing that came from that encounter was a limp.

I want to talk to you from both sides of the divide, from strength and also from vulnerability, and out of both sets of pronouns, from them and us, but hopefully from the perspective of names, of personal knowledge, of intimacy. For I still think of myself sometimes as a well person. And at the time I knew Marcia Goldner and Peter Stone, and Richard Vereen and Linda Postema, and Debbie Long, I was a well person, in terms of physical health. And some of them were too. But, if you'll pardon my grammar, maybe they were well-er than I was and I barely knew it at the time.

Vulnerability and strength. We hide behind our assumptions of strength, and don't show the world our fear. Our fear of failure, our fear of looking stupid, our fear of not being the strong person the world thinks we are. And the more accolades that are heaped on our heads, the harder it is to admit we don't deserve them. And too often we think we are the ones who have something to offer those who are sick or vulnerable or different. And then we hit our Jabbock, when we can't hide anymore.

Walter Brueggeman wrote, in an article about life and death, *'common biblical scholarship understands that life and death are not absolute states but constitute a continuum of strength and weakness. Thus every weakness is a death and every strength a resurrection...'*¹

Those were wonderful words when I read them this spring. *"Life and death are not absolute states but constitute a continuum of strength and weakness. Thus every weakness is a death and every strength a resurrection..."* although I would argue that every weakness is also a resurrection, and every strength also a death.

And one of the wonderful things about Christian communities, a thing which is found less and less elsewhere, is that we celebrate those passages of life where vulnerability and strength, continuity and change, are at the center: birth, baptism, confirmation, graduation, marriage, death...life and death.

We welcome babies, and call them by name.

We pray over the sick, and call them by name.

We celebrate commitments in marriage, in faith, in unions, and call those by name.

WE bury the dead, never unnamed, but graciously named and called by God.

And in all those encounters we are honoring the strength and the vulnerability of each person, each child of God.

But back to them and us, to nouns and pronouns, to the divisions that threaten to undo us, worldwide, countrywide, denomination-wide, and probably right here in Durham or here at First Presbyterian. And I realize that I walk into a dangerous chasm, talking about casting away divisions when the atmosphere country wide is about a greater cultural and political division than this country has seen in a long time, and most of us are glued to our television sets as we watch the political story this year. Not only here, but the whole world is divided, angry, bitter. Last Sunday I sat in church while the young associate pastor listed all the parts of the wartorn world we would pray for, and the list seemed to go on and on.

Sudan,
Zimbabwe,
Colombia,
Pakistan,
Iraq,
Iran,
Georgia,
Russia.
Thailand

But even in foreign affairs and in our own political fights, I believe that strength can be found in vulnerability, in those who can talk about their own vulnerability without hiding their strength. For me, that's truth-telling. Isn't that what the Jabbok story tells us? That we may limp after we confront our own inner, historical, physical, or societal demons, but that doesn't mean we quit walking.

¹ "After Death", by Walter Brueggeman, article in Christian Century, July 1, 2008.

Paul talks about the way this them/us problem divides the Christian community in Romans: it may seem a minor problem to us but it was a major problem to them: who eats meat and who doesn't. A minor problem? Let's translate that into who drives green and who doesn't, who votes red and who votes blue, who shoots moose and who wears lipstick, how the church divides on the issue of ordaining gays...maybe the issue Paul is dealing with isn't so minor after all. And Paul focuses not on right or wrong, on us or them, but on strength and vulnerability, and too, on truth-telling.

And the question for all of us, is, not are we right, but can we acknowledge the name, the very thou-ness of the other? And can we tell the truth? Can we see vulnerability in strength and strength in vulnerability? Isn't that the challenge of the Christian community?

I want to tell 3 stories about life in this congregation, and in one other very much like this congregation.

1. Richard Vereen was a young African American man who frequented the congregation, came to Bible studies and Adult Education classes, was present at dinners and big events. He was smart, but he tended to get inside people's personal physical space comfort bubbles and make them uncomfortable. He used to borrow Rob's cigarettes (yes, that's when we used to smoke in the Fellowship hall, or at least some of us did!) and Rob said it was his way of becoming one of us (notice the pronouns there)..borrowing a part of what he saw a strength. But you know, for all we (pronoun there) thought we were accepting Richard, if there was a problem we'd call Mary Milbourne Banner, who was then staff for the Urban Ministry program. Did we ever really see the "thou" in Richard? Did we ever really know the person named Richard? Did we see the incredible strength in his vulnerability? I know I didn't.

2. Another story. It was a summer evening, the glass doors leading to the parking lot were open to let in the breeze. The session was meeting in one of the parlors. In the middle of a budget discussion a homeless man came in. He looked at the 24 of us well-heeled, busy people, and said, "Can someone give me some money to buy dinner?" We all stared blankly at each other not knowing what to do. Finally I got up and walked him outdoors, and pointed him to the Men's Shelter. "You can get food there". When I went back into the session meeting, the budget discussion had just started again. But Betsy Cox interrupted it to say, in anguish, "Folks, do you see what we did? That was Jesus who just walked in the door... and we kept talking about the budget! What's wrong here?" there was an awkward pause... and we went back to the budget!

Them and us, strength and vulnerability. Do we see the naked need in the eyes of the vulnerable, do we show the naked need in our own eyes, or do we cover it up?

4. Most of you remember Marcia Goldner, who died of MS about 6 years ago, but LIVED with MS for 20 years. I was privileged to meet her when her physical strength was vibrant, she wore high heeled shoes and was still working. But during the time I knew her she once asked me, "Does God know how many more steps I have to take in my lifetime?" Each step she took, whether a step across the hall or a journey into another dependency, required new strengths and great vulnerability. I remember once night at the Harvard's house when she held one arm with the other to try to steady them while she

ate. Carlisle and I were talking to her, and she couldn't spear the last bite with her fork. Carlisle had the sense to say, "Would you let me get that for you?" And I wonder how much strength and how much vulnerability it took Marcia to simply tell the truth: to laugh and say "Yes!" And Carlisle reached over, took the fork, speared the last bite, and fed it to Marcia... and at that point the chasm between well and ill, between us and them, was bonded in love.

We just returned from Portugal, where the word for 'thank you' is obrigada. It's the one word we learned to say with perfect intonation and accent. But we still had to think, because it's a gender-sensitive word. It translates easily as 'I'm obligated to you', but in order to say it you have to think whether to end it with an 'o' or an 'a'. So you never lose sight of the person you're thanking, of the gender, of the humanity of the other.

A little closer to recognizing the precious name, the thou-ness in the other. To recognizing the other person's worth as well as the other person's need, their vulnerability as well as their strength.

One more story.

This story isn't about FPC, but it could be. It was told to me by a volunteer at the homeless shelter in Binghamton, and the volunteer was a member of a church very much like FPC. She was walking to her car about 8pm on a fall evening. She saw some men she recognized from the shelter standing around a trash can fire warming their hands. She went up to them to greet them, and as she did so a cop car slowed down, a cop rolled down his window and said, "Lady, are you all right?"

She told me she was so flustered and embarrassed for the men she just said quickly "yes" and walked on. The next night she talked to the nun who ran the shelter. "What should I have said," she asked. "Well, you could have said, "Yes, I'm one of them."

Vulnerability and strength.

Well and sick.

Poor and rich.

Black and white.

Red and blue.

Gay and straight

Male and female

Associate Pastor and Pastor...

But the polarity that divides all those sets of words is not just a political one or an economic one or even one of whether you have cancer or whether you don't. It's whether we recognize the strength in another's vulnerability and whether we acknowledge our own vulnerability in our strength.

That's what I believe Paul was pointing to, and Paul was speaking to Richard Vereen and the man at the homeless shelter, who showed so much grace to Betsy, and to each one of us. "Take care of the one for whom Christ died."

Jesus did not die for our accolades. He did not die because we have degrees. He did not come to earth for the important, or even for those who do a lot for others. He didn't die for our weaknesses, either. He died for Richard and Debbie, and Joe and Betsy, and Marcia, and for you, though I can't name you all by name right now, and for me. Take care of the one for whom Christ died. .

He calls me by name, and you too. In Christ, there is no anonymity, no generic pronouns, there are no simply strong people, or simply vulnerable people. There is only you, me, the faithful Muslim at prayer, the family who lost their home in the hurricane in Haiti, all children of God, standing in the need of prayer.

Let us pray.