



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

“Struggling for Resurrection”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On August 18, 2024, from Genesis 32:22-31

I’ve always loved the words of the old African spiritual:

“I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name.
Jesus told me that the world would turn against me
if he changed my name.
But I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name.”

Many of you were here in the sanctuary when Callie Day sang this haunting song as a part of her exceptional set. Since then, I’ve learned the five-time Grammy award-winning artist and civil rights hero, Roberta Flack, who was born in the mountains of North Carolina, reimagined this spiritual in 1969 on her #1 platinum album *First Take*, which has now become one of the most famous versions of the song ever recorded.

Somehow, Roberta found a way to make this spiritual more haunting and more melodic at the same time. But what truly impressed me most about her version is that she added a few verses that were not in the original, “Jesus told me your father, your mother, your brother, and your baby sister won’t know you, if I change your name. But I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name.” Roberta rightly understood that this spiritual, which is a metaphor for baptism and conversion, could also be interpreted as a song about conviction and the cost of following one’s conscience in a world set against you, or a family that disowns you. Just as she reimagined the song “Ballad of the Sad Young Men,” as an ode to the Stonewall Generation and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, so too Roberta’s version of “I Told Jesus” can be sung as a manifesto for people “coming out of the closet” especially for our transgender and nonbinary siblings, as many of them will literally make the decision to change their names, which often causes the world (and sometimes even their families) to turn against them or disown them.

Naming ceremonies were incredibly common in ancient tribal communities and in indigenous cultures today. Unlike Western culture where most of us have the same given name our entire lives, in indigenous traditions, a person might have two or three names during their life; a given name at birth, a descriptive name at the beginning of adulthood, and a spirit name when they become an elder. We frequently find naming ceremonies in the Bible, which seem to function as a rite of passage. Abraham, Sarah, Joshua, Solomon, Naomi, Peter, and Paul, and many others had their names changed at significant or transformative moments in their spiritual journey.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

This is not only a Judeo-Christian phenomenon, as some of the most famous examples in the 21st century occurred when public figures changed their names upon converting to Islam like Muhammed Ali, Malcolm X, Yusuf Islam, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

One of the most powerful stories about a name change is the story of Jacob. You may remember how Jacob stole the birthright of his brother Esau, which tore his family apart and caused a deep rift between him and his brother. Our story takes place many decades later after Jacob has built a large family and herds of cattle and has just learned that his estranged brother, Esau, is coming to meet him with four hundred men, which terrified Jacob. He prayed that God would deliver him from the hand of his brother Esau, because (I quote) “I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.” So, Jacob created a plan to appease his brother by giving him two hundreds of goats, rams, camels, and cows. But he was still so scared that in the middle of the night, he took his wives, children, and everything he had and sent it across the river ahead of him and spent the night at the camp by himself.

Jacob was filled with fear and distress because he believed Esau was going to mount a surprise attack in the middle of the night, ambush, and kill him. And Jacob was right to be worried, because he would be ambushed, not by Esau, but by the living God. There is no other story in the entire Bible where God physically wrestles with a human being, which is why many scholars have argued that this was not God but an angel, or Satan, or his brother Esau in disguise. Others claim Jacob was wrestling with himself, or his own shadow, like the famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung. All these readings are possible because the writer of Genesis does not tell us who this person is. It remains a mystery. They are simply called “a man”; a representative for God that ambushed Jacob and wrestled with him through the night.

As if this story were not already extraordinary, we are told that Jacob recovered from the ambush of his strange attacker and would not allow them to prevail. They were equally matched and found themselves in a tie, a draw, a stalemate, an epic clash of the titans. And as the sun was rising and God’s mystery man realized he could not beat Jacob; he struck a violent blow on his hip knocking it out of socket and begged Jacob to let him go. But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So, the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humanity, and have prevailed.’ Then just as mysteriously as the man came, they disappeared. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ Then the writer fell into poetry and said, “The sun rose upon him as he walked away limping because of his hip.”



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Jacob survived the ambush and the wrestling match, winning a blessing and a new name from God, but he was left injured, forever marked by the encounter and interminably changed by the struggle. In fact, his new name “Israel” would be a constant reminder of this moment as it means “the one who struggles with God.” The great scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Gerhard von Rad, once wrote, in this story “Israel has presented its entire history with God prophetically as a struggle until the breaking of the day.” Jacob’s new name “Israel” would represent not only his strength and capacity for struggle, but also his ability to struggle well. It stands as a continual reminder of the battle he had to endure to make amends with his brother. First, Jacob had to come to terms with himself and his own identity to be ready to reconcile with Esau and the rest of the world. We all know it is the journey that matters, not the destination. The same is true of the struggle. It is not winning that matters, but how we struggle. Like Jacob, we are called to struggle well.

As a white cis-gender heterosexual male, I stand in awe of the struggle our LGBTQ+ siblings, have faced and continue to face every day, especially our transgender and non-binary friends. It is a struggle I will never personally experience, but one I have the most profound respect for and will not abandon. On this PRIDE Sunday, as we celebrate the beautiful diversity of God’s creation, as a church we proclaim that people of all sexual orientations and gender identities are beloved children of God who must be welcomed, affirmed, included, and embraced as part of the family of God. We lament and repent for the ways that Christians and other religious groups have harmed and continue to harm LGBTQ+ people, and whether we are a part of that community or not, we commit ourselves (once again) to join in solidarity with their struggle for rights and liberation.

The struggle continues, as the ACLU and the Human Rights Campaign have been tracking 638 anti-trans bills in 2024, which is more than any other year on record, making this the fifth consecutive record-breaking year for total number of anti-trans bills considered in the U.S. 45 of those bills passed and another 127 are still active and being considered, as the targeting of trans people increasingly moves to the national stage. Trans people are being targeted in education, sports, health care, civil rights, bathrooms, employment, incarceration, birth certificates, marriage, the military, and more. There are 7 bills being considered in North Carolina and 36 in South Carolina. And all of this is negatively contributing to the rate of mental health crises, suicide, and death among trans and non-binary youth. But it is not just a struggle for the rights of trans and non-binary people. If Roe could fall after 49 years, there’s no reason to think Obergefell (that secured the right of same-sex marriage) is any safer with our Supremely Unjust Court! The struggle continues, and while it may not be our fault, it is our responsibility to continue to struggle.

Israel’s struggle did not end at sunrise on the ford of the Jabbok River. Students of the Bible will tell you that even after Israel reconciled with his brother, no one ever called him by his new name.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

For the remainder of the book of Genesis and the rest of his life, everyone called him Jacob, even though God had given him a new name. Israel knew his name was changed and that he'd experienced a profound transformation of personality and identity, but no one else seemed to know what happened, or worse, no one ever cared to acknowledge it. Israel had to live the rest of his life knowing who he was while the rest of the world did not truly see him.

Israel's experience is a lot like transgender and non-binary individuals today who have transitioned and chosen a name and pronouns for themselves, but their family, friends, school, church, and community refuse to accept who they are. Many describe the intense pain and trauma that occurs when loved ones continue to "deadname" them or "misgender" them with the wrong pronouns. I know it's difficult to mentally shift the way we've used the English language our entire lives. Some of you are still having a hard time following me using the name "Israel" instead of "Jacob" and that's in the Bible! We're not going to get it right all the time, but shouldn't we still try? Don't we all just want to be called by our true name, seen as our true selves, and known as we truly are. It is the core of our humanity. Trans and non-binary folks face countless obstacles to accessing employment, housing, healthcare, or just living life on a day-to-day basis. It can be especially dangerous if you are a trans woman of color. So, the act of choosing a name for oneself is one of the most powerful acts of liberation. It is an incredibly important watershed moment in the struggle for resurrection, and if we aren't willing to at least try to honor that then we simply don't care and we have no business calling ourselves an ally.

Mark and Bridget Todd knew their child Buddy was struggling when he was a toddler. Buddy was in Cub Scouts, baseball, and basketball, but always wanted to wear dresses, long hair, and nail polish. Mark and Bridget let Buddy wear dresses at home, but they were afraid of him being teased so they would not allow it outside. They lived in tension for years and as Buddy entered elementary school, things got more complicated. Bridget found an entry in Buddy's diary where he said that if he could be anything in the world, he would be a girl. Buddy began exhibiting behavior problems and severe tantrums, and Mark and Bridget, who are special education experts, could not get through to him. They thought Buddy might be gay, but it had never occurred to them that he might be transgender. All their reservations about helping Buddy explore his identity came to a halt one pivotal moment. After he had another meltdown, Bridget said to Buddy, "I don't like to see you this sad. It breaks Mommy's heart. What can I do?" Buddy responded, "Some days I wish I could die so that God would bring me back as a girl."¹

At that moment Mark and Bridget knew they needed to pursue counseling to help Buddy, and they began to realize he was experiencing gender dysphoria, the deeply held belief that one was born the wrong gender. Medical professionals shared that children understand this about themselves as early as 3 or 4 years old.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

That was the year Buddy began a journey of becoming Lilly. Bridget says, “Mark and I believe that Lilly didn’t ‘decide’ to be a girl; she is and always has been a girl.” Though they were unfamiliar with this journey, Bridget says, “We knew something like this was going to have to happen for Lilly to be happy.” While Mark and Bridget have been supportive and not held onto the person Lilly was, it has not been without internal struggle. Bridget says, “I never struggled with wanting to do the right thing. What I struggled with is grieving the son I thought I had. I gave birth to a boy. He wore his little denims and his baseball cap. When I look at a photo of him as Buddy, I miss that little boy. Then I look at Lilly and think: ‘Never mind. This is so much better’.” Bridget and Mark had to let go of what once was and allow Lilly to be resurrected, to become a new creation, to live fully as God intended her to be.

With the loving support of her parents, Lilly started her first day of third grade as a girl. She was worried about how her peers would receive her, and when a group of curious girls came up at recess asking questions, Bridget said, “This is the same person you knew last year, that you played four-square with, jumped rope with, that you ran around and played ball with. This is the same exact person. [Only now, Buddy wants to be like you – a girl.] Do you think we can let her be herself and do this?” The girls nodded in agreement, and they took Lilly’s hand, and ran off to play. Bridget says, “I stood there with tears in my eyes, trusting that the rest of the day would be OK, that I could let her go and all would be well. That was the moment she was completely free, and we’ve never turned back.” Lilly needed her parents and friends to let Buddy die so that she could be reborn, so that she could be resurrected, so that she could truly live. It was a struggle for everyone, but in the struggle, there is formation and growth and joy. As Frederick Douglass wrote, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Nothing good in life comes without struggle.

Jacob was already struggling when he arrived at the ford of the Jabbok River. He was already in a crisis about seeing his brother again for the first time since he stole something precious from him. Jacob was trying to figure out how to apologize, ask for forgiveness, and seek reconciliation, but he was terrified that Esau might kill him and his entire family and take back what was rightfully his. God showed up at the most terrified moment of Jacob’s struggle, during his dark night of the soul and wrestled with him until daybreak. The good news of this story is that God enters into the very depths of the struggle with us and grabs ahold of us as he grabbed ahold of Jacob and binds God’s self to us in the midst of our struggles. Just as God helped to get Jacob prepared for the encounter with his brother Esau, arming him with a new name and blessing him with a new identity, God will do the same for us if we are willing to embrace the struggle and strive to struggle well.

For all our LGBTQ+ siblings who celebrate this weekend, we bless you with the blessing of a God who enters our struggles and wrestles with us. Like Jacob, you have struggled with humanity and with God and prevailed. You’re still here. You’re still kicking. You’re still alive. As Lucille Clifton wrote, “everyday something has tried to kill you and failed.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

And because you have prevailed in your struggle with humanity and with God, there is no obstacle, or foe, or bill, or law, or politician, or religious leader, or think tank, or state, or nation, you cannot face, no matter how hateful or hostile or death dealing. Because God the wrestler will be at your side. You may be marked, or wounded, or changed by your struggle, but those scars are the reminders of what you've overcome (amen!). Those scars are the symbols of the God who has ultimately been for you, for your lives, and with you in the struggle. And if God is for you, who can be against you?

The struggle continues and those of us who identify as allies and accomplices to our LGBTQ+ friends, we must each find our own unique way into the struggle through solidarity, so that it might be said of all of us, "for you have struggled with humanity and with God and prevailed." We must find a way to sing their song of liberation with as great a passion and vigilance as if it was our own song and sing it until that day when there is no more struggle and all of us who have been waiting for resurrection can raise our voices in harmony together in one chorus:

"I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name.
Jesus told me that the world would turn against me
if he changed my name.
But I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name."

¹ <https://www.pressherald.com/2016/02/07/becoming-lucy-portland-family-embraces-reality-of-childs-gender-identity/>