

Wrestling with God

Sermon given by The Rev. Dr. William Harrison at his installation as Principal of Kootenay

School of Ministry at All Saints', Vernon on July 31, 2011

There's a tradition that a new principal preaches at the installation. This is an opportunity to make a public statement about the school and about the new principal's vision. Being the first principal of a new institution adds to the sense of occasion. Something tremendously important is happening and it is my job, as principal and priest, to bring this thing to light — for the school community and the sponsoring diocesan community, both of which are represented here, today.

Christians — and here I mean all Christians — are called to embrace a task. We have only one task, though it takes many forms in many lives. Our task is to participate in God's creative work throughout the cosmos. In baptism, we have committed to serve the Reign of God, wherever we may find it. We have taken upon ourselves the shared task of looking for those moments of God's transformative love at work. We have taken upon ourselves the shared task of *becoming* those moments of God's transformative love at work. We have agreed, with God and one another, that together we will join with God and rejoice with God as God makes us and the whole world into a true and suitable image and likeness of God, members of the Body of Christ.

This is a beautiful and mighty vision and, I think, a true one.

Unfortunately, there is a rather visible fly in the ointment and the fly is carrying a sign. The sign, in blinking neon lights, says, "It's more complicated than that!" Actually, try to think of that fly as wearing glasses, a beard, and dark red academic robes, because I've decided that

the theme of my teaching just might be: "It's more complicated than that!" I note that students, after they've heard the line half a dozen times, appear to be seized by an unaccountable desire to swat me — which may explain the usefulness of the fly metaphor.

As humans, we are always tempted to swat the complexity fly. We long for simple answers. When we can't find them, we invent them. And we live by them, as much as we can. The more that we doubt them, the more vigorously we proclaim our belief in them — sometimes yelling loudly to be heard above the rising hubbub of our own uncertainties. That, however, does not really squelch the buzz of the irritating complexity fly. The complexity fly has its own ways of biting us. As a remarkably current example: we may pretend, for a while, that human behaviour does not affect the operation of the world's animal life or its climate — but eventually we will see some of the consequences of our actions. Of course, the complexity fly buzzes around making solutions rather difficult: I'm still not sure that my new compact fluorescent lightbulbs, filled with mercury vapour, are necessarily a better answer to the world's needs than the old incandescent bulbs.

I was raised in a part of Christianity that is commonly known as "fundamentalist," by which is meant that the people who surrounded me had managed to tune out the buzzing of the complexity fly almost entirely. When I was twelve, I knew all the answers — the vast majority of which were entirely, profoundly, and dangerously, wrong. Shortly after that, I became involved in political life, and embarked on one of the standard responses to the complexity fly: the double life. I stayed a member of a Christian denomination which firmly, even harshly, rejected any involvement in the public world, while being an actively partisan political hack who ended up studying political science while working for a cabinet minister on

Parliament Hill and lending my skills to every campaign going. My journey as a theology student began when the complexity fly took a serious bite out of me — making me aware that my Christianity had nothing to say to the rest of my life. So much for heading to law school and following the obvious career path. I needed to find out whether Christianity had more to offer. After all, the religion had been going for two millennia and had counted among its number some of the greatest thinkers in the world. Christianity must have more to say than was known by the uneducated elders in my church. *It must be more complicated than that!*

At this great turning point in my life, I did something momentous, something truly decisive: *I switched metaphors*. I did. Really. I ceased to be the guy ignoring the fly. I became Jacob the wrestler. And here we see the first of two major purposes of a theological school: the theology student wrestles with God.

We bump up against important religious issues every day. We make decisions about where our world is going, where our lives are going. We make decisions about how to spend our money, what to wear, and whether or what to drive. We make decisions about how to treat the people we love dearly, and those we love — well, not so much.

These are religious issues; they reflect our lived theologies. They also form our lived theologies — which may not, I hasten to add, look a lot like what we claim to believe. So, we spend much of our time ignoring the larger implications of our decisions. We don't really want to know what they mean, lest our lives be made more complicated, less comfortable.

The challenge of theological education, whether it's undertaken through Kootenay School of Ministry or its companion programme, Education for Ministry, or through some other means, is to wrestle with life and its meanings. But, this is not just any kind of wrestling.

Theological education is about wrestling with God, asking what God means and intends. Our common project — and here I want to remind you of the title of a book by an Anglican theologian, "We are all theologians" — isn't just to do the right thing, it is also to know what the right thing is. We are called to stare firmly and squarely at the object of our doubts and questions, and engage it until daylight comes.

And, it's precisely at that moment, when we come to grips with the object of our inquiry, that the complication begins to emerge. The most ambiguous and confusing aspect of Jacob's story has to do with the identity of the one with whom he is wrestling. Jacob wrestles with a man — apparently an ordinary creature of time and space. And, indeed, this is where we must start any theological journey. Our questions begin with the ordinary, day-to-day facts of life. Our questions start with ourselves and the people around us. Our questions start with the world that God has made.

However, Jacob knows that there is something more to this man than meets the eye. And, indeed, we know that there is something more to this world than meets our eyes and ears. Jacob demands of this man a blessing. He receives a new name, a new identity — the gift of God. That is the object of our enterprise: the newness that comes with God's transformative work in our lives. I call to your attention that this is precisely where I started: the vision of God's transformative work in our lives, making us over into the divine image.

Jacob wants something more. He's a real wrestler. Jacob wants the name of the one with whom he is engaged, the object of his fight. Jacob wants to understand the full nature and extent of God's work in the Jacob's life. This is where he bumps up against the limits. There is only so much that he can know or understand; the investigation doesn't lead to all answers.

This, my fellow theologians, is the reality of our lives. Always, some aspect of God's nature and God's work in the world remains beyond us. Even as we receive and know God's blessing, even as the sun breaks in, always, some part of the great God eludes us.

Some, of course, will take this as an excuse not to wrestle. If I can't have all of the full, complete, and final answers, then I will simply not waste my time! My answer is that in this enterprise, as in every other field of investigation, some small accomplishment is much better than none at all. Simply to ignore the questions because we cannot answer all of them fully is to doom ourselves to lives adrift, in a world adrift. In that world, those who are sure of themselves and their wrong answers will dominate. The sermon of hatred and discussion will always find an audience.

Theology is always a matter of public significance. The second major purpose of theological education takes us beyond the wrestling: we are called to feed the people. The blessing that we seek, those of us who ask questions about God and the world, is not for ourselves alone. When people are hungry for answers, our task is not to send them out to the villages looking for food. Instead, Jesus' command rings loud in our ears: "They need not go away. You give them something to eat."

Some of those whom we train will be priests, some deacons or lay leaders. Many will not seek any of these offices, but will be called to speak the good news of God's love in the offices, hospitals, stores, and coffee shops of our world. All of us are called to bake the loaves that we can bake and prepare the fish that we can prepare. We cannot send the people away when they are in need.

The ministry of understanding and sharing the good news of God's Kingdom belongs to all the baptized. Our common mission of feeding the world is not only a task of providing bread and water to the physically hungry and thirsty. Many who hunger have more physical food than they know what to do with. Their salvation does not lie in eating more meat; the lust for stuff does not save. Their salvation can only come in meeting the God who is Truth, the God who is Transforming Love. We must be prepared to tell them of God's love. We must be prepared to tell them of the joy to be found in trusting the Creator. We must be prepared to tell them of our great hope in the Kingdom that God is building.

At the same time, we know that we can do know more than accomplish our own preparation and be willing to give our theological loaves and fishes to the hungry. We cannot feed the whole world. We cannot build the City of God; that is God's work. So we bring the fruits of our theological labours to Jesus the Christ, knowing that he will take up our work and make it into the work of the Kingdom.

The glorious news is that our shortcomings are no limitation to God. In fact, they are the ways that God has made us. God welcomes our efforts. God takes hold of us and our work and brings to our efforts the transforming power of divine love. God, the Most Holy Trinity, blesses our theological enterprise and uses it as one of the building blocks of the Kingdom.

So, complexity is not my enemy. It is, indeed, one of the beauties of God's world. Together we wrestle with our theological challenges, trusting that God will bless both our investigations and our communications, enabling us both to know and to share the wonderful news of the Kingdom of God. In that spirit of faithfulness, I invite you to share in the work of Kootenay School of Ministry. Come and learn, if you can. Whether that is possible for you or

not, please remember that Jacob received a blessing because he asked for it. Do pray God's blessing upon Kootenay School of Ministry and stand with us as we move into God's future.