

“Keep on Wrestling with God” based on Genesis 32:22-31 and Luke 18:1-9
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 19, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

My count may be off, but I believe that today we celebrated our 29th baptism in the last four years. Of those, 27 of these were baptisms of children and infants. In the liturgy, you as a congregation promise to guide and nurture the newly baptized, doing so by word and deed, what we say and how we live in response to God.

You promised to encourage the newly baptized to know and follow Christ. You promised to encourage them to be a faithful member of the church. So it is that baptism is an action of the church to include the baptized, and our promise to pass down the faith to them. If the baptized is a child or infant, like most of these, it is the parents who make a similar commitment.

This is not a small matter, even if it is just seems like it's a few questions in the liturgy we've now heard so many times. I think most of us understand this commitment, even if the questions are not asked. You see, having children in a church service, as we do every week, brings joy because these children minister to us as adults because of who they are. Any responsible adult then knows that we are to set an example for them. We are to strive to be someone for our children to look up to and emulate. Anyone who knows the value of God's love in their life, surely would want the newly baptized to know it in their lives also.

And yet, we also know that the journey of faith is not always easy – it can be a struggle. We are pulled in different directions by the world, which often promises easy answers. We are pulled in different directions even by voices in the church, who by their words and deeds, paint very different pictures of God.

Some in the church offer easy answers to align with the world or to align with their specific ideology, be it political, social, or moral, which they claim is somehow God's preferred ideology. They claim that this is black and white. You are either with them, and God, or you are against God, and against the bible. In response, we may agree right away if our own ideology agrees, or we might feel a cognitive dissonance and question it.

However, then we want to pacify that struggle. The temptation is either to say, “Well, I need to accept it because that's what the teacher says,” or sadly, the temptation can be to say, “If that's what the faith is, then I don't want to be a part of it.

The truth is that recent studies have shown a rising number of what are called “nones.” This is not the habit-wearing Roman Catholic women, but N-O-N-E-S, in the American religious landscape. These are people who do not consider themselves to be atheists, necessarily, but they are not, in their minds, religious. At least, they are not bound to any particular form of religion outside themselves. They are tired of the culture wars that don't feel like Jesus.

Usually, the shift comes after a move, when every life habit changes. The most frequent time someone falls away from the church is when they move to a new town, because finding a new church sometimes feels like more effort than it's worth. As vibrant and alive as this church is right now, these 27 baptized children and their many peers, either already baptized or still yet to be baptized, will at some point in their life, face this in their lives.

Many of us as adults have also faced this. I myself have moved nearly a dozen times to five cities. So, the question is this: How will we guide these children now, while they are still with us, and nurture them by our words and our actions?

Don't get me wrong. This is NOT about perpetuating the institution of Shelby Presbyterian Church or even the institution of the PC(USA), the denomination which we belong to. This IS about giving our children the tools to have a relationship with the Lord our God. This is NOT about us feeling like accomplished parents because "see, I raised Christian children." This IS about our kids knowing that they are loved by God just as they are right now. They are loved for who they are, and who God made them to become in this world.

So the question is again: How then will we fulfill our promises to guide and to nurture, by word and by deed? How will we encourage them to know and follow Christ and be a faithful member, not simply of Shelby Presbyterian or of the PC(USA), but of the universal Church of Christ that exists in so many expressions?

The truth is that we need to resist the urge to pacify the struggle within us. As I often say, if you read scripture and it doesn't challenge how you think, then you're probably reading it wrong. This is because the bible is not a book of easy answers. It is a book of stories about the revelation of God by the people who have wrestled with God throughout time. It is them trying to understand how the creator of all things, the highest God, could also be a personal God, who knows you and loves you as an individual, and who knew and loved a people called to his service.

This is what I love about our passage from the Book of Genesis this morning. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, the son of Isaac and Rebekkah, left the land of his birthright after he stole the blessing of his father from his brother Esau. He allegedly knew that God's promise was for him, but he was impatient. So, he scammed his brother twice.

The first time was when his brother was really hungry, he said, "I'll give you this stew I'm cooking if you give me your birthright." His brother gave it to him. He wasn't thinking. Then in the second time, he puts on goat skin and pretends to be his brother to their blind father and accepts a blessing that was meant for Esau originally. As you would expect, he had to run away because his brother wanted to kill him. The irony is he asked for a birthright and the father's earthly blessing, but then he had to leave and never got it.

Now, Jacob is returning home after 20 years of service to his uncle Laban, who is his father-in-law. Laban is pretty much as shifty as Jacob. The first seven were agreed upon, but then he was tricked into the second seven years. Then six years more, and Laban continued to deceive him, until Jacob gets the last laugh, tricking his uncle into helping him build his flock. This is the flock of animals he is now leading home to the promised land where he was born.

Our text this morning comes after Jacob receives word that now as he approaches, his brother Esau is coming to him with 400 men, presumably an army and they will meet soon – tomorrow. Unsure of what to do, Jacob does what Jacob does – he starts thinking of a scheme. He divides everything he has. He is confused by what he thought he was supposed to do in going back, and how it is now playing out, with his brother coming with an army. He prays to God, reminding God of the promise that was made to him.

So it is that Jacob, who left with only his staff, and now returning wealthy with flocks, after flocks. So, he creates two separate camps. He sends the first camp ahead with the animals he's already planning to give his brother. Then he takes a second camp across the ford of Jabbok. This is where he has his wives and children, and the livestock he plans to keep.

This is this logic: If Esau comes and attacks, at least half of us can get away and he's going to attack what I'm giving him anyway. He protects what is most cherished to him – his wives and children – But then he leaves them alone, going off to be by himself farther away. It's unclear if this is still yet another strategy to keep himself safe if Esau gets to his wives and children, but he could just be going off to clear his head and prepare for his meeting with Esau.

Regardless, he doesn't get any sleep. He wrestles a man all night, and only at daybreak the man asks to be let go. The man touches Jacob's hip, injuring him, causing him to limp for life. The man asks for Jacob's name, then gives him a new one: "Your name shall not be called Jacob always, but 'Israel' because you have contended with God, and with people, and you have overcome." Jacob asked for the man's name, even though the man gave him a clue, but the man does not give his name and instead blesses Jacob, who then recognizes him and calls the place Peniel, because he has seen God there and lived.

Beloved, the name given to the nation that the Lord first called to be a blessing to all nations, was received from their ancestor's struggle with God that night. This story establishes for them a recurring theme – a struggle with God in story after story. The story of God's people is one of struggle and lament in prayer, wrestling with God and always afterward being blessed. Remember that blessings are not necessarily material goods, but the things that put us on the path to God. They are what bring us closer to the Lord who loves us. In Hebrew, to bless is to straighten the path, and the word for sin is to be bent. We can think of God's blessing as what draws us near, while our injustice draws us away.

Twice in this sermon, I've recounted the promise that we make to the baptized. However, in doing so, I've left off a part of the promise – How we promise to do it. Our promise is to guide and nurture by word and deed, with love and prayer. When we love and establish the foundation of God's love, and then, when we persist in prayer, even when it seems we go unheard, then we are being faithful. We are ready for the Son of Man's return.

Beloved, when God entered into our humanity to live in our limits, it was for love. God so loved the world, that God gave the unique and only Son, our Lord Jesus, so that whoever believes in him will not die but have life in the age to come. Too often we flip this and act as if we believe ourselves into God's love. No, God loves you into belief, and so when we love, we believe and living in Christ.

Likewise, Jesus in our passage from Luke emphasizes prayer. He is not comparing God to the unjust judge here, but using an ancient argument of lesser to greater: If an unjust judge eventually hears you, don't you think God always hears you?

Jesus wants us to be persistent in prayer not because God needs us to knock "X" number of times, but because when we are persistent in prayer, wrestling with God, we will be blessed. We will be brought nearer to God, away from sin and closer to those for whom we pray. We also become changed in ourselves as we overcome, humbled in the process.

God is not injuring Jacob out of spite or cruelty, but Jacob is humbled in time for his meeting with Esau. You see Jacob is probably looking for a fight, but now he is limping and he cannot fight. He must be humble when he goes before his brother. He must seek reconciliation, not victory.

Beloved, when God entered into our humanity to live in our limits, it was for love. God humbled God's own self, by the eternal Son becoming one of us. Fully God and fully human, he lived in our limits, pushed back against sin and death, with healing, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity – with love. When sin and death pushed back, and crucified him on that Roman cross, he suffered and died for us. But on the third day he rose again. So the faith of the church is that he ascended into heaven where he reigns as king, uniting our humanity with God, making us the adopted Children of God by the Holy Spirit sent to us, living in and among us.

Beloved, life is not the way it should be. There is pain and there are times we wonder, “God why are you not stepping in? How long O Lord?” as the laments in scripture. But I say to you, “Keep on wrestling with God.” There is so much that sin and death do in this world, and it makes it hard to believe that they have been defeated. It can make it hard to believe in God at all. But doubt is not the opposite of faith – certainty is.

We cannot settle for easy answers that eliminate our faith. Don't worry. Fret not. It's hard to think your way into a new way of acting. The easy answers don't change us. Instead, immerse yourself in the story of God so we can be an example to these children by confessing when we mess up, doing what we can to make sure that through anything they know they are loved by God and loved by us.

It's better to act our way into a new way of thinking – to love so that we might understand God's love for us. We keep on wrestling because in our prayer, in our love for love's sake, we will be blessed. We will struggle with God and with humanity, but we will overcome, humbled and able to seek reconciliation, not victory.

It's better to struggle in the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross than to wriggle away with cheap grace or the supposed freedom of unbelief. Love and pray. Keep on loving and praying. Then you will know who Jesus is and what he did for us.

So, yes, it is a struggle. There are no easy answers. But please, keep on wrestling. I say again: Keep on wrestling. Amen.