

“You don’t have to do it all by yourself!”

August 3, 2008

Text: Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14:13-21

I.

As human beings, and certainly as Americans, we have a powerful urge to be *independent* don’t we? Europeans, for example, will tell us that we’re like that—notably independent in our spirit and nature.

Truth be told, we’ve been like that since the Founding Fathers helped put our nation on the track of independence back in the late 18th century. In fact, the *Congregationalists*, our forbears, who came over from England and from the Netherlands a century before, were of this very same independent ilk. And it continues to be woven into our church polity today.

Our churches are independent. We call it local church autonomy.

- At the same time, we’re very *covenantal*, which has to do with commitments beyond ourselves.
- But still, we like our independence; that no outside person or entity can tell us what we have to do. Not the Florida Conference; not the national office in Cleveland. We’re independent. And for the most part, we like it that way.

Indeed, the spirit of the *rugged individualist* is deeply ingrained in the American spirit. The independent person ... totally self-reliant ... doing it his or her own way. We Americans resonate to **Frank Sinatra’s** famous hit, *My Way*.

II.

Often times, we see streaks of *independence* evidenced in our children at an early age. Yvette tells the story of the time she was bathing our oldest daughter, Natasha, when she was about a year and a half, out in Palo Alto, CA. Anyway, Yvette had finished bathing her, dried her off, and powdered her up ... all ready for her pajamas.

However, as it turned out, Natasha had wanted to dry herself. When her mother finished, Natasha, with a look of absolute determination on her face, promptly got back into the bathtub waters getting totally wet all over again ... and then proceeded to dry herself.

We have this *independent* streak in us, don’t we?

At the other end of the life cycle, my father, who turns 91 in September, still drives ... which is not THAT uncommon at his age. But his sight is not good ... and his hearing is

not good. But somehow he keeps passing the annual driving test. Still, the day is coming when we're going to have to take his car away from him and that's not going to be a pleasant experience.

Being able to drive is such critical sign of *independence* in our culture isn't it? For many older people, when they can no longer drive, they lose a strong sense of their identity as an *independent* person. We're all concerned about how he's going to react once he can no longer drive.

The point is—again, we're an independent people, aren't we?

Now, clearly, there's a place for being independent. In many ways, it's part of the maturation process in our culture. For sure, we all want our children—at some point, at least—to grow up, become independent and get out on their own.

But sometimes, don't we take it too far? Isn't it sometimes the case that we're too independent? That we go overboard trying to go it alone ... doing everything ourselves ... never letting anyone help us out?

III.

There's the classic story of the young boy helping his dad with the yard work. His dad had asked him to clean up the rocks in a particular area. At one point, his dad looked over and saw the boy struggling mightily to pull up a huge rock buried in the dirt. The boy struggled and struggled as his dad watched.

Finally, the boy gave up—unable, apparently, to move the rock. *I can't do it*, he lamented.

Did you use all your strength? his father asked? *All the resources you had at your disposal?*

Yea, dad, he replied, *I used every thing I had. I couldn't budge it.*

The father smiled and said, *No you didn't, son. You didn't ask me to help you.*

Being a rugged individualist, an independent person, can be a good thing. But isn't there a point beyond which it becomes ridiculous?

The message for today is:

- it's okay to ask for help.
- It's okay to reach out and invite other people in.
- It's okay to NOT to do everything under the sun all by ourselves.

IV.

Imagine if Jesus had taken a *do it myself* approach in our story from **Matthew's** gospel this morning about the feeding of the five thousand.

Now, we all know the story ...

- How the multitudes had followed him that day when, deeply troubled by the news of John the Baptist's death, he'd been trying to get off by himself for some personal time ...
- And how, upon seeing all the people and noting their needs, he had compassion for them and soon began curing the sick and attending to them ...
- And then, later, when the sun was setting and the people were hungry ... what were they going to do?
- Five loaves of bread and two fish; that's all they had. And all these people to feed.

Part of the point of the story, of course, is that, while a certain amount of self-reliance is a good thing, there are times when we have to reach out in trust—to God ... and other people—in order to achieve God's purposes ... to realize our goals.

And of course, that's what Jesus does. He organizes the people ... takes the five loaves and two fish ... *looks up to heaven* ... *blesses* the food ... and everybody ate.

As in the story, God, of course, is the ultimate resource for any person of faith. But we, too, are resources for one another. Friends, there is nothing in the Bible or in the Christian faith that would ever suggest that we're supposed to solve all of our problems and meet all of the challenges that come our way all by ourselves.

V.

Now, for sure, having said that, as human beings, there are some things we can only work out on our own ... some things that only WE can do, that only WE can resolve and work through. That's just life ... part of what it means to be a human being. There's always this solitary element to our lives.

That gives us a glimpse into what was going on with **Jacob** *on the other side of the river Jabbok* in our reading from **Genesis 32** this morning. In many ways, Jacob's wrestling with God, or with the spirit or whoever it was, remains a mystery. But, whatever it was, it was something Jacob had to do on his own; some sorting out only he could do.

Always, there is that element to our lives.

But there are many areas of life where we're better served, and so is everybody else, if we invite other people in. In most ways, our lives work best when we help one another, when we don't try to always go it alone.

Jesus looked to God and to the support of God's guiding hand in everything he undertook. That's part of the function of prayer in our lives. Our prayers are a reminder that—no matter who we are—we all have needs ... problems and challenges we can't solve by ourselves.

Translation: we need one another.

Translation: it's okay to say, *I need you ... or, I could use your help or your support.*

Translation: ***You don't have to do it all by yourself!***

The point is: too often we don't ask for help when we should.

VI.

How often do we hear stories of family members or friends who injure themselves, sometimes seriously, because they were too proud or too stubborn (or whatever) to ask for help? To call the family member nearby ... or the friend or neighbor?

In my experience, it is almost always the case that people are willing, even eager, to *be there* for one another: to lend a helping hand, to be sure; but also as a friend and as a listener.

Most of us here this morning are both willing and able to be a caring and supportive friend; and no doubt many of us already are and, perhaps, in multiple situations.

For example, when someone we know needs someone to talk to; someone to bounce things off of—some personal worries or concerns. No matter anything about us, we all need friends and a support group.

Too many of us keep too many things all bottled up inside ... to the point where they fester away ... and wear on our spirit. Sometimes, even, we become physically sick in all of this ... all because we don't reach out and unburden our spirit.

Friends, we don't have to cope all by ourselves. Up to a point, for sure, we're individuals and we like our independence. But we're also social people; we're people of the spirit. And we're not alone. And, moreover, there are times when we need each other. And that's okay. In fact, it can be a good thing.

I like the Thanksgiving Day prayer offered by ten year-old Jimmy:

Thank you, God, for this Thanksgiving day and for all the holidays. Thanks for the turkey and all this delicious food. Thanks for mom and dad, and even my little sister who sometimes can be such a pain. Thank you, God, for our schools ... for books, TV and game boy. And thank you for loving us, God, because the truth is: without you, we're sunk. Amen.

Amen, indeed. **We don't have to do it all by ourselves.**

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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