

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, October 16, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8**  
**“Wrestling a blessing”**

Today has been designated Students and Colleges Sunday by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I'm not sure whether this day was designated for that purpose because of the Lectionary texts for today, or whether the Lectionary texts for today were selected because the day was designated for that purpose. Whichever it was, the theme of teaching, education and learning runs through all of today's texts. And the same theme runs through this sermon. But first, a couple of sort of points vaguely connected to the theme.

First point: I did my arts degree at Aberdeen University in Scotland. I was fortunate enough to have all my classes there in the oldest part of the University, King's College. King's was founded in 1495, which makes Aberdeen University the third oldest in Scotland. It was founded by William Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen, to provide trained doctors, teachers and clergy for the communities of northern Scotland, and lawyers and administrators to serve the Scottish Crown. Given the fact that it was founded by a Bishop, it's maybe not surprising that the motto of the University is *Timor Domini Initium Sapientiae*. Which, as of course you all know, means, all together now – oh, all right, I'll tell you. It is part of Psalm 111:10: the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. I find that a powerful starting point for thinking about teaching, education and learning.

Second point: of all the teachers I had, in high school, at King's, and in seminary at New College in Edinburgh University, one stands out head and shoulders above the rest. He was the Reverend Professor Alec C. Cheyne, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at New College. Alec was a churchman, a theologian and an academic. His lectures were painstakingly researched and intellectually stimulating. And he delivered them with both a passion for his subject and a delightfully sly sense of humour. I enjoyed him so much that in my final year, I had only one class on a Friday, Alec's class on the Scottish Reformation. It was at 4pm, and I can honestly say that I didn't miss a single one of them. That's the kind of teacher he was, and the desire to know more that he inspired in me.

Third point: one of the greatest satisfactions I have had in my ministry has been the students I have come into contact with.

- students who were candidates for ministry from the Presbyteries I have served in;
- students who were candidates from other Presbyteries whom I have met while serving as a counsellor at Guidance Conferences;
- students who were candidates for whom I have served as Theological Field Education supervisor and Internship supervisor;
- the music students who have sung and do sing in our choir;
- the students of nursing, law, business, medicine, geography, history, philosophy, science, math, engineering – you name it, we have students in the congregation who are studying it or have studied it.

And meeting them and working with them, and walking with them for a time, assisting them on their journey, has been a way for me to grow and be blessed.

We could think of the verses from Psalm 119 that formed our responsive reading this morning as the

Psalmist's love song for Scripture, and all that it means to him. He is talking about the same thing that Tevye sings about in *If I were a Rich Man*, from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack

To sit in the synagogue and pray

And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.

And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.

That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Sheldon Harnick obviously knew his Bible – Psalm 119:103: *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

In a similar vein, Paul's words to Timothy are an encouragement to study the *sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*. And they also provide a justification, if any were needed, of why the Scriptures should be studied: *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work* 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

Alec Cheyne made it very clear in his church history lectures that this was just sort of thing that Reformed theology and Presbyterian theology in particular have always emphasised. Bishop Elphinstone wasn't Reformed or Presbyterian, but it was mainly in order to have an educated clergy that the good Bishop founded King's College. It was in order to have people able to read Scripture for themselves that the Scottish reformers insisted on a school as well as a church in every parish. It is in order to have preachers who can read and interpret and wrestle with Scripture that the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and just about all Presbyterian churches, in the western world at least, require that candidates for ministry have an undergrad degree and then go on to study theology at the master's level.

Which takes us back to the story of Jacob at the Jabbok in our Old Testament text for today. Studying theology and Scripture at the master's level – OK, studying anything at the master's level! – is hard work. It can be a struggle. It demands long hours, and late nights, and lots of strong coffee. It requires meeting exhausting levels of thinking and writing and presenting. It requires students to commit for an extended period of time, and often to a sizeable student debt, in order to reach the desired goal.

\And it sometimes makes students feel like Jacob – having to wrestle a blessing, having to fight through the night in order to win what they seek. And there is no doubt that some of them who wrestle emerge battered and bruised, just as Jacob limped off as the sun rose.

But while I am very glad that is all behind me, and with apologies to the students in the congregation this morning, I don't think I'd want to make the study of theology and Scripture any easier. Because when we wrestle with our subject, especially when we wrestle with Scripture, Scripture wins. And we win. Scripture wins because it changes us. And we win because Scripture changes us.

Or more accurately, the God who inspired all Scripture for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, changes us, until even we, because we belong to God, become proficient, equipped for every good work.