

“Rumi,” by Rev. Mark Caggiano, 10/19/25

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Jacob was wrestling with a stranger. We are not told exactly who this man is. Some interpret it as an angel. Some as God. After this battle, Jacob is given a second name, Israel, as a reflection of this event. The name “Israel” means one who wrestles or struggles or contends with God. This encounter describes a relationship with God that is not simple, not straightforward. It is a struggle in many senses of that word.

In the Jewish tradition, from the commentaries known as the Talmud, this is not simply a story about a physical altercation but the human condition. We contend with fear and anxiety, we strive for self-reliance and spiritual maturity. We struggle to transform ourselves even as we seek out God in the process.

And that process is not pretty. It is not painless. It involves discipline and sacrifice. Do you recall how the stranger gets out of the wrestling match? He gives Jacob a cheap shot on his hip, putting it out of joint. That would have been horribly painful. And there is no indication that Jacob’s injury ever completely healed.

There is a tendency in modern religious conversations to focus on all the good that comes from God. I could be accused of doing that as I speak again and again about how God is love. I would add to that impression that God is *no less* than love, but I think it remains a meaningful critique of that straightforward message. Because in a world filled with suffering people, and people who cause or permit that suffering, there is a lot going on around us which does not seem like love. I would argue that that means it does not come from *God*, but that is small comfort to those who are suffering.

Religion is about stories. Stories we are meant to live by. Stories that tell a cautionary tale. Stories that are intended to make us think. The Bible contains many such stories, some of which we hear on Sunday morning. But not all of them. We have a carefully curated list of stories, ones that are for the most part not too troublesome upon our weary hearts.

Yes, the Easter story is filled with hard moments, but we generally save most of those for Good Friday. Yes, the Christmas story contains both the birth of Jesus and the treachery of King Herod, but we usually place the worst of Herod on the schedule after December 25th. Why spoil a good time?

It is a peculiar quality of American culture that we want happy endings. Only happy endings. We want comedy rather than tragedy. We do not like our movies too heavy and by no means do we want to put up with subtitles. Movies are for entertainment, and you should always leave the theatre happy. The good guys need to win. The bad guys must get their comeuppance. And all dogs must survive.

But should the same be true for our *religious* stories? As I mentioned, Jacob was injured by God or God’s messenger. And Jacob himself was a swindler and a con artist. He tricked his nearly blind father into giving him his brother Esau’s blessing. He cheated Esau out of his birthright. He convinced his future father-in-law Laban to give him all his spotted goats as his wife’s dowry, only to then spend years breeding the herds to increase the number of spotted goats. And not to be outdone, his father-in-law tricked him into marrying his eldest daughter, Leah, rather than the younger daughter, Rachel, who Jacob was expecting to marry. Not an upstanding family.

And yet, we do not learn as much from stories with happy endings. You remember consequences better than you remember blessings. Or, as the saying goes, the hot stove teaches best.

This Sunday, I wanted to talk about a historical figure, a poet. A man you might have heard of but probably did not know much about. His name was Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī but he is more commonly known as simply Rumi, which means a man from the city of Rum (or Rome). This could mean a Roman, but in this case, it is a person from Anatolia or what we now call the nation of Turkey (which was “Rome” in the sense of Byzantium).

Rumi was alive during the 13th century, born in Afghanistan. He was a Muslim and more specifically a Sufi. This is a group of Muslim mystics, and they were prominent in this time and in this area. They focus on meditative practices such as the dances of the whirling dervishes you might have seen. They are not simply dancers, but also men who have taken vows of poverty and austerity much like a Catholic monk.

Rumi's poetry is generally religious, indicating a deep faith expressed in vivid and beautiful language. And if you were a fluent speaker of Persian you would be able to grasp all the subtleties and nuances of his poetry. Rumi's poetry has been translated into English and has become very popular. However, some of those translations took liberties along the way. This was perhaps to make the works more generally appealing but it meant stripping away some—one might say most—of the original religious intent behind the words and images.

Our middle hymn this morning is one example of such translational exuberance.

*Come, come, whoever you are,
wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
Come, yet again come.*

There is a descant to the song, not always included, that goes like this: *"Though you've broken your vows a thousand times."* Obviously that line suggests a longer and more difficult relationship even as you invite someone back into the loving embrace of a community. Still lovely if a bit more complicated.

But again, that translation does not convey the full message, the message intended by Rumi 700 years ago. I found a couple of translations into English that are probably less well-known.

*Come again, please, come again,
Whoever you are.
Religious, infidel, heretic or pagan.
Even if you promised a hundred times
And a hundred times you broke your promise,
This door is not the door
Of hopelessness and frustration.
This door is open for everybody.
Come, come as you are.*

And there is a sharper version still:

*Return (in repentance), return! Whatever
you are, return! Even if you are an unbeliever or a Magian or an
idol worshipper; return! This court of ours is not a court of despair.
Even if you have broken your repentance a hundred times,
return!*

A Magian suggests the same title as "magi" from the nativity story and represents someone who followed the Zoroastrian religion, common in Persian speaking areas. I have also seen this translated as "fire-worshipper" as is one pointed way of understanding that tradition.

Rumi was calling out to people who had fallen away from his religion, Islam, and calling new people into the fold. It was an expansive message of loving forgiveness for straying from the right path or wandering without knowing of that path. And yet, it is also a description of how these people have gone astray. Worshipping idols, following heretical practices, adding pagan influences into your religious life. You are doing something wrong, something impermissible, but you can still turn back. You can still repent your wrongdoing, even if you fail a hundred times.

By the way, this language could have been lifted directly from the Bible. This message about false idols and foreign influences, this message about heresy and faithlessness, it can all be found in the words of the prophets

and the teachings of Jesus. And that should not be a surprise because Muslims revere the teachings of the Jewish prophets and Jesus.

Well, maybe that is a surprise for some. Maybe we do not understand how closely related these branches of the Abrahamic religions are. Honestly, through my studies, I have found Islam to be very reminiscent of both Judaism and Catholicism, their traditions and practices. It is far less consonant with Protestantism, which focuses less on behavior and practices than faith and faith alone.

Rumi's message of forgiveness from the poem is the same as expressed from a saying attributed to the prophet Mohammed: "Allah accepts a person's repentance till their very last breath." For those interested, the word "Allah" is often mistaken for the "God" in Islam, which is not exactly the case. The prefix "al" can be translated as "the" while "lah" is an ancient word meaning a god. Together "Allah" means "The God" or the one and only God in the strict monotheism of the Islamic tradition.

If you ever thought that Islam was an alien religion, you are likely thinking more about its customs rather than its theology. There will even be the Day of Judgment when God calls everyone back into his presence. Who will return to the earth that day to usher in the moment? The prophet Isa, who we know more commonly as Jesus of Nazareth. There are of course differences, but not the vast gulf of differences many assume.

Rumi's religious poem was changed. It was altered to suit the purposes of the translator. It was turned into a happy little message of acceptance, minus all the sharp edges. And you might be wondering at this point what does any of that have to do with us? Well, it has a few points of interest.

I recently purchase a neat little book, the *Book of Common Prayer*, an edition from 1662. A reprint, of course. And this book has many interesting things that I am looking through. For example, it has several prayers that are almost identical to our prayerbook. *Almost* identical, because someone back in the days of yore decided that a few sentences did not need to be carried forward into the wilderness of Chestnut Hill. I will read one of them:

Almighty and most merciful father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against our holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.

Notice anything different?

There are a few instances of this editing, when some of the sharper edges of these traditional prayers were altered. Altered why? Probably because someone did not want to sit in the pews and recite out loud that they were a "miserable offender." I have seen something similar in versions of the hymn, "Amazing Grace," where one line is changed: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch; like me!" but instead of the word "wretch," they swapped in the word "soul."

Because I am not a wretch. I am not a miserable offender. I am not a sinner. Which is what I think this trend is about. Being a sinner.

But sometimes we are. Sometimes we are wretched. Meaning someone who has sunk deeply into distress or sorrow. Sometimes we are miserable offenders. Meaning someone who is unhappy that they have broken their promises, someone who is now seeking to repent. And sometimes we are sinners. Meaning we have failed to live up to the moral expectations of our religious tradition.

But what if I am not a sinner? Then my friends, we need to discuss the notion of sin. Because we all sin. Each and everyone of us sins. Your best friend sins. The sweet little lady down the street sins. The living saint sins.

We all get angry with people who do not deserve it. Anger, meaning impatience or stubbornness or being overly critical. We all have moments of selfishness. Selfishness meaning putting ourselves before others. My career is more important than a family event. My public image is more important than my relationship with an old friend who is less put together than I fancy myself to be. Can't bring him to the club. And my financial needs are more important than those of someone without enough food to eat.

The Bible is filled with examples of people who think they are being righteous, and therefore sinless, and yet they fail to care for the poor or to comfort the sick or to protect the strangers and aliens within our midst. They pray in the Temple and offer the right sacrifices, but what does God say in response? From the Book of Micah and partially quoted in our very own prayerbook:

*Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To [do] justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

“Humbly” is interesting here because humility is one of those virtues that people try on for size from time to time but they do not always remain so clothed. Humility is a lot like sack cloth and ashes—it will become irritating after a while.

You might have heard someone say that “Mistakes were made.” Yes, mistakes were made and someone made them. Hiding behind the passive tense does not make a mistake anything less than a mistake. A mistake or an intentional act. Something careless or something spiteful. Something done out of anger or jealousy. Something we ought not to have done or something we ought to have done.

And yet there is the possibility of forgiveness, even if you have broken your vows a hundred times or a thousand times. Jesus was asked how many times one should forgive someone – seven times? – and he responded seventy times seven. Meaning again and again.

Rumi wrote the following poem:

*Let go of your worries
and be completely clear-hearted,
like the face of a mirror
that contains no images.
If you want a clear mirror,
behold yourself
and see the shameless truth,
which the mirror reflects.
If metal can be polished
to a mirror-like finish,
what polishing might the mirror
of the heart require?
Between the mirror and the heart
is this single difference:
the heart conceals secrets,
while the mirror does not.*

In our hearts, we truly know when there are things we could have done better. That does not mean we have to live a perfect life, or worse that we expect those around us to live perfect lives. It means we need to be ready to reflect on our actions, to admit mistakes, and to ask forgiveness from anyone we have injured and from God.

We are at times wretched, at times miserable offenders, and yes at times even sinners. And it may be embarrassing to admit that, let alone recite it as a prayer on Sundays. It is embarrassing to ask forgiveness and repent what we have done wrong. But that door remains open. Open back to God. And open to those with hearts ready to forgive.

I will not presume having knowledge of anyone other than myself and so I too will confess that I have felt wretched this week. I have been a miserable offender who was too short-tempered, too self-absorbed, and too oblivious to the needs of others. And yes, I have had a pretty tough week with the death of my father, as many of you know. But still it is worth taking a deep breath and reflecting on what was not right. What was not loving or caring, what was too selfish or overly petty, and what was misplaced frustration aimed at someone close at hand.

We gather together here in a place dedicated to God. And in this place, we may sing God's praises even as we pray for deliverance from the hurts of our days. We can listen to beautiful music in honor of God, even when we are occasionally bowed down with pain or sorrow. And we can enter this place seeking forgiveness from God for the mistakes we have made and understanding for our shortcomings, great and small.

Religion can be so very beautiful. The music and the prayers, the ideas and the lessons. But religion cannot *only* be beautiful. It cannot only be transcendent or poetic. We also need to talk about sin and sorrow and death.

Because if you forget sin, you forget the value of virtue. If you forget sorrow, you forget the value of happiness. And if you forget death, you forget the value of life. And so let us ask God to forgive our sins, comfort our sorrows, and deliver us into his loving embrace when our days are done. Amen.