

**Listen To Your Life**  
**Genesis 27:1-4; 18-27**  
**Preached by Jennifer Pearson**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, February 22, 2009**

I was first introduced to Frederick Beuchner through a book called Soul Survivor by Philip Yancey. Yancey, subtitled the book “How my Faith Survived the church” The obvious question is ...what type of church did you grow up in...Yancey discusses growing up in Georgia in the 1960’s and remarks that the church he grew up in made up of 200 people had “a corner on the truth, God’s truth, and everyone who disagreed with us was surely teetering on the edge of hell. He says we used to sing the song..”red and yellow, black and white they hare precious in his sight....” But..you just let one of those red, yellow, or black children try entering our church. Yancey writes that the pastor would always say that “God is love” yet the image he always received of God from the sermons was of an angry, vengeful tyrant” (Yancey, 2001)

Yancey, assuming that he is not the only person who may have grown up in a less than ideal church, goes on to outline 13 persons whose lives displayed a more authentic Christianity. A type of Christianity that he largely found lacking in his younger, formative years. He writes about G.K. Chesterton, C. Everett Koop and Paul Brand and physician who works with leprosy, Henri Nowen a catholic priest who gives up working in the most austere of academic setting to go to a village and focus on severely handicapped adults. And then near the back of the book is a person I had never heard of before named Frederick Beuchner. Yancey writes that Beuchner became a “mentor for me in rediscovering a gospel that had grown too familiar (Yancey, 2001)

Like Yancey, I grew up in the church, not one like he described. but I am sure I learned all the bible stories from back when I was in preschool sitting in the circle for story time. I became interested. Was there a new twist to these bible stories and new application, a way of looking at them that might yield some freshness and insight?

I first found an autobiography Beuchner had written entitled “Telling Secrets. In it is summarized the following recollection. “One November morning in 1936 when I was 10 years old, my father got up early, put on a pair of gray slacks and a maroon sweater, opened the door to look in briefly on my younger brother and me, who were playing a game in our room, and then went down into the garage where he turned on the engine of the family Chevy and sat down on the running board to wait for the exhaust to kill him. Except for a memorial service for his Princeton class the next spring, by which time we had moved away to another part of the world altogether, there was no funeral because on both my mothers side and my father’s there was no church connection of any kind and funerals were simply not part of the tradition. He was cremated, his ashes buried in a cemetery in Brooklyn, and I have no idea who if anybody was present. I know only that my mother, brother, and I were not” (Beuchner, 1991)

And that begins his memoir

So, who is this guy? Beuchner begins his career not as a minister or with any religious affiliation at all, but as a writer. He has the mixed blessing I guess of having tremendous success with his first book, “A Long Days Dying” After moving to New York to build on previous success he finds that the writing gift has left him. Walking around New York City one Sunday morning he finds entering Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church whose pastor was Geroge Buttrick. He sits in the congregation and much to his surprise, has a conversion experience. This experience is so significant that he finds himself the next week enrolling in Union Theological Seminary with plans to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister. A relative, so shocked by this choice asks him. “Freddy did you make this decision on your own, or were you poorly advised” (Yancey, 2001).

While ordained, he never pastored a church and instead devoted his life to teaching and then to full time writing. A central theme in many of his writing is this Call to “listen to your life” These are not just trite words for him. His autobiography he provides the framework for doing so. Beuchner discusses his fathers suicide, his battles with debilitating fears, his daughter’s struggle with anorexia and his struggle to accept his powerlessness in the face of her illness, and thorough all of those times he discusses his doubts. And he does it not in a way to be sensational or to evoke sympathy, but to say that this..this is my life..this is my story...AND...

“My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours. And nothing is more important than that we keep tract, you and I , of these stories who we are where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely though theses stories in all their particularity and I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself know to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually”(Beuchner, 1991). So our stories help us to see the outline of God in our life, places where. If you were to look at Beuchner’s life, an obvious question for me at least, is why would God allow Beuchner’s father to kill himself. When Beuchner considers that he states.

“God did not will what happened that early November morning in Essex Fells, NJ, but I believe that God was present in what happened. I cannot guess how he was present with my father—I can guess much better how utterly abandoned by God my father must have felt if he thought about God at all... I can speak with some assurance only of how God was present in that dark time for me in the sense that I was not destroyed by it but came out of it with scars that I bear to this day, to be sure, but also somehow the wiser and the stronger (Beuchner, 1991).

Beuchner writes though that a minister really has two stories to tell: his personal story and then a Biblical story. To leave the personal and segway into the professional, I wanted to highlight Beuchner by introducing you to one of his more familiar sermons

entitled the Magnificent Defeat. In it, he looks at the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau.

And for me this was a familiar story..(although I always mix up Jacob and Esau) In short, Jacob steals the blessing from his older brother Esau...Beuchner provides the reader with background details and then adds his fresh perspective. He says...Look at this story. "It is not, I am afraid, a very edifying story. And if consider the aftermath it becomes a great deal less edifying still. What I means that if Jacob, as the result of duping his blind old father, had fallen on evil times, if he had been ostracized by his family and friends and sent off into the wilderness somewhere to suffer the pangs of a guilty conscience and to repent his evil ways, than the moralists would have a comparatively easy time of it. As a man sows so shall he reap. Honest is the best policy. But this is just not the way things fell out" (Beuchner, 1991).

"One the contrary. Once his dishonesty is exposed and the truth emerges there is really surprisingly little fuss. Old Isaac seemed to take the news so much in his stride that you almost wonder if perhaps in some intuitive way he knew that it had been Jacob all along and blessed him anyway believing in his heart that he would make the worthier successor (Beuchner, 1991)

"For anyone who is still trying to find an easy moral here this is the place for despair because in the very process of trying to escape the wrath of the brother he had cheater, this betrayer of his father camped for the night in the hill country to the north, lay down on a stone for a pillow, and then dreamed not the nightmare of the guilty but a dream that nearly brings tears to the eyes with its beauty. He dreamed of a ladder set up on the earth with the top reaching the heavens and angels ascending and descending on it and there on the top in the blazing starlight stood the Lord God himself speaking to Jacob himself.....The land on which you lie I will give to your descendants; and your descendants will be like the dust of the earth... Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." (Beuchner, 2006)

So..what do we make of this...years go by Jacob is ready to return home. Return home to get what is his. Then one night as he camps by a river, out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob and they fall to the found, their bodies lashing through the darkness. (Beuchner, 2006) The stranger simply touches Jacob's thigh and Jacob is now helpless. He is crippled and he has lost. All of his strength and brute force was not enough because the stranger he was fighting was God. . Jacob was not strong enough to defeat this stranger. Where is the lesson?

Power success, happiness as the world know them are his who will fight for them hard. Jacob fought for the blessing, tricked for the blessing, stole the blessing, and he got it. But. but peace, love, joy are only from God. And God is the enemy who Jacob found there by the river. Jacob could fight his way for success in the eyes of the world, but peace, love, and joy are only given as gifts from God.

We will use the next to Sundays to look at Beuchners sermons. Keeping in mind his message “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”(Beuchner, 1991)