

**Show Your Scars
Genesis 32:22-32**

**John W. Vest
August 14, 2011—9:30 and 11:00 Worship
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

“Hello, Cleveland!”

It is a rock star nightmare, to stand in front of an arena of fans and call out the wrong city. For the rest of us, it is hilarious, the stuff of jokes and mockumentaries.

After a busier than usual summer of youth ministry and mission travel, I can identify with the constantly-on-the-road tour mentality that underlies this joke. I’ve been canoeing on the Wisconsin River, doing work on a denominational commission in Seattle and Louisville, volunteering with junior high youth at the Special Olympics at Illinois State University, co-leading a study tour of Israel and Palestine, attending a denominational mega-conference in Indianapolis, on an urban youth mission trip to Detroit, at a youth conference in Montreat, North Carolina, and most recently, on a mission trip to Northern Ireland. Like Johnny Cash, I feel like “I’ve been everywhere, man.” It’s good to be home in Chicago. It’s good to be back with my family. It’s good to be home at Fourth Presbyterian Church.

The sermon I bring you this morning is an expanded version of a sermon I preached last Sunday at [Fortwilliam Macrory Presbyterian Church](#) in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I come with warm greetings from this lovely congregation and from our mission partners in Belfast: Bill Shaw at the [174 Trust](#) and [Doug Baker](#), the PC(USA) regional liaison for Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Our mission in Northern Ireland was a joint venture bringing together people from Fourth Church and [Old St. Patrick’s Catholic Church](#) here in Chicago. We were an interfaith and

intergenerational group that traveled to Belfast mostly to learn. The people of that remarkable city, as they welcomed us in and shared their stories, were indeed our teachers. In large part, our focus was on the history of the [Troubles](#) in Northern Ireland—a decades long conflict between social and political groups at least nominally aligned as Catholics and Protestants. We were especially interested in what people are doing today to work toward true peace and the even more elusive goal of real reconciliation.

During our times of group reflection and processing, our mission team studied the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, two brothers that were bitterly divided by their actions yet somehow managed to reconcile with each other. You may remember how Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright and his patrilineal blessing. Esau is so enraged at these deceits that he openly seeks to kill his brother, which prompts Jacob to flee to their mother’s homeland. Ultimately, their story ends as a happy one. After years of estrangement, when Jacob and Esau embrace each other as brothers, rather than fight as enemies, it is a story of love and forgiveness triumphing over hatred and pain.

Yet right before this moving story of reconciliation, Jacob has a mysterious encounter with an enigmatic figure at a place called the Jabbok River. Listen as I read this remarkable story, found in Genesis 32:22-32. You are welcome to follow along in your pew Bibles, but I will be reading from the [Common English Bible](#), a brand new translation I hope you will be hearing more about. Listen, now, for God’s word.



Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River’s shallow water. He took them and everything that

belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."

Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." The sun rose as Jacob passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh. Therefore, Israelites don't eat the tendon attached to the thigh muscle to this day, because he grabbed Jacob's thigh muscle at the tendon.



The story of Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok River is a powerful reminder that even happy endings come at a price. Jacob is the hero of the story—a flawed hero to be sure, but the hero nonetheless. In fact, he is the patriarch from whom the people of Israel derive their very name. So when their namesake hero, this man who wrestles with both humans and God, emerges from this conflict limping from a wound that will never fully heal, the people of Israel learn that no one emerges from conflict unharmed. Perhaps it is the case that no one emerges from *life* unharmed. Jacob, like so many of us—perhaps *all* of us—carries a scar that reminds him of who he is and where he has been.

It is often the case that children, especially boys, take some degree of pride in the scars they have. For some, scars are proof that they are tough fighters, but more often than not they are trophies of bravery and daredevil stunts—a crazy bike trick, a jump from a high tree, an amazing play in a sporting event. When children grow up, these scars are often reminders of childhood immaturity, or downright stupidity. I know that I have scars like this.

Sometimes even adults indulge in this prideful showing off of scars. There is [a famous scene in the classic movie *Jaws*](#) when the three men hunting the killer shark are sitting around a table on their boat late at night, sharing a drink and one-upping each other with their scars and the stories that accompany them. The old boat captain Quint begins by revealing a missing tooth and then a lump on his head from a barroom brawl. The marine biologist Hooper follows suit with a scar on his arm from a moray eel attack. Quint comes back with an injury from an arm wrestling match. Hooper counters with a scar on his leg from a shark bite and Quint reciprocates with a similar wound on his own leg. To himself and to the audience, police chief Brody reveals that his only scar is a tiny one on his abdomen from an appendectomy, hardly worthy of sharing with these seasoned men.

After joking about his greatest scar, a broken heart from a former lover, Hooper asks Quint about a scar on his arm that turns out to be from the removal of a tattoo. The tattoo once indicated that Quint served on the USS *Indianapolis*, the ship that was sunk not long after delivering parts for the first atomic bomb to a US military base in World War II. Quint tells how many of the survivors of the sinking ship faced an even greater horror as sharks attacked them as they floated helpless in the water, waiting for rescue that took days to come. As Quint, a contemporary version of Captain Ahab, tells this painful story while relentlessly pursuing a killer

shark, it is clear that removing his tattoo did not remove the scar of the terrifying ordeal he experienced after the sinking of the *Indianapolis*. Indeed, it is clear that Quint's scars run much deeper than what anyone can see on the surface.

In Belfast, our mission team visited the [WAVE Trauma Centre](#), a place of support and healing for people suffering physical and mental injuries from the Troubles of Northern Ireland. Five brave men—both Protestants and Catholics—showed us their scars and told us their stories. Liam was nearly beaten to death with hammers, after a peace deal had supposedly been reached. He continues to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and paraplegic migraines. Richard's brother was brutally murdered. All told, fourteen members of his family died because of the Troubles. Alex was a cabdriver who lost a leg and nearly lost his life when his cab was blown up by a car bomb. He still carries around a small canister of shrapnel that the doctors removed from his leg.¹

Their injuries, and their scars, run much deeper than what anyone can see on the surface. *Every* aspect of their lives has been traumatized.

As we talked about the powerful experience of hearing these stories, a member of our mission team pointed out that scars are about much more than where they come from. It is just as important to consider what we do with our scars.

One of my favorite bands is the hard rock and heavy metal group [Metallica](#). For years, their singer and rhythm guitar player, James Hetfield, has struggled with alcoholism. Especially in recent years, Metallica's music has been a way for him to confront his demons and work through the trauma he has suffered, and the trauma he has no doubt inflicted upon others. A

¹ These and other stories can be read in *Injured...On That Day* (2nd Edition; published by WAVE Trauma Centre).

[song](#) from their [most recent album](#) includes the refrain, “Show your scars.” For Hetfield, showing his scars is a way to heal. It is a way to confront and overcome the pain of his life. His scars *define* him in the sense that they have shaped his life, but they do not *confine* him to a past he can never escape. He uses his scars to help others face in themselves what he had denied for so very long, namely that he is a broken person in need of healing.

When the men from WAVE showed us their scars—the visible ones and the hidden ones—it helped us connect the pain and trauma of the Troubles to real people. People with names. People with faces. And though none of us can fully identify with them in exactly the same way—or, for that matter, with anyone who has lived through the Troubles of Northern Ireland—we realized that each of us have scars of our own.

More often than not, these scars are the hidden kind. We carry with us the pain of loss and loneliness; broken relationships and estrangement; family strife and friends that betray us; addictions and self-destructive behavior; illness and disease; fears and insecurities. Like Jacob and his limp, none of us—not a single one of us—gets out of life unscarred.

Show your scars.

Israel told and retold the story of Jacob, scars and all, because it was their story, a story of imperfect people—people just like you and me—who are wounded but not defeated. Perhaps more than anything, the men at WAVE simply want to be recognized, simply want to have their pain acknowledged and cared for. Friends, isn’t that what we all want? Isn’t that what we all need?

Later in our week of mission learning in Belfast, we spoke with a member of the [Corrymeela Community](#). Founded in 1965 by Presbyterian pastor [Ray Davey](#), Corrymeela is a

community of Christians that reaches across sectarian divides to promote peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and beyond. In Belfast, community member Alistair Kilgore shared with us what has proven to be their guiding insight, that community—and healing—comes from telling our stories and having those stories heard.

In many respects, I feel that the people of Northern Ireland are better at this than we are in the United States. We have a tendency to keep some of our deepest divisions and conflicts quiet and under the radar. We act as if racial inequality is a thing of the past, but it clearly is not. We act as if we are the land of opportunity, but some people right here in our city never even have a chance. Friends, we can learn much from the open way Northern Ireland is confronting its past and forging a way to a new and better future. Still, to hear the longing for recognition from the men at WAVE, my hunch is that we all have much yet to learn.

Show your scars.

We must learn to be better at telling our stories and listening to the stories of others, especially, in the words of our national church's [most recent confession](#), the “voices of peoples long silenced.” In Northern Ireland, Doug Baker shared with us that the biggest obstacle to reconciliation today is complacency. For many people, it feels as if the conflict has been settled and energy has been refocused on the needs of everyday life. But, like a massive iceberg, the most dangerous elements of conflict remain below the surface.

So it is in our society. So it is in our city. It is so easy for us, in this beautiful sanctuary in the Gold Coast, to become complacent about what is happening beyond this neighborhood, beyond the safe neighborhoods in which we live. Even as we tell our own stories, we must

listen to the stories of others. We live in one of the most segregated cities in the United States, and ours are not the only stories of Chicago.

[Currently playing at the Gene Siskel Film Center](#) is a powerful new documentary called [The Interrupters](#). It chronicles a year in the work of [CeaseFire](#), an organization here in Chicago committed to stopping the violence that is ripping apart large portions of our city. This film is *the* best two hour presentation you can see of the reality of Chicago's culture of violence and the people who are affected by it. You must go see this film, and bring others with you. You will hear the real stories of people living in neighborhoods of poverty and violence. You will hear the stories of people who have escaped these cycles of violence and are now working with CeaseFire to be a part of the solution.

You don't have to travel to a place like Belfast to hear stories of trauma. I've returned from my summer of travel committed more than anything to engaging in God's mission right here in Chicago. Go see this film and hear about violence interrupters Tio, Ameena, and Cobe. Listen to the pain suffered by the family of Derrion Albert, some of whom we have hosted here at our church. You will see the scars of our city that rarely show up on this end of Michigan Avenue. See these scars and ask yourself how God is calling us to respond.

Show your scars.

Our scars *define* us but they do not *confine* us. And they are not the only marks we carry. What a joy it is each time we celebrate the baptisms of dear children such as these. In the sacrament of baptism we tell each other that we are all children of the covenant, marked as God's own forever. Just because it is not visible, do not think that the waters of baptism do not leave a mark. The seal of the Holy Spirit marks us as those whom God has called into this world

for a special purpose. We are called to carry the love of God into a world of wounded and scarred people. We are called to be peacemakers. We are called to be reconcilers. We are called to be healers. We are called to seek justice in the world. We are called to be the body of Christ *for* the world.

And we should never forget that even in victory, Christ's own body was scarred. None of us—not a single one of us—gets out of life unscarred. Yet no wound, no pain, no tragedy, no conflict is beyond the reach of the redemptive love of God.

Show your scars. Friends, show too the sign of your baptism. As you tell your story, tell also the good news of God's kingdom emerging all around us. Show who you are as a child of God. In a world that is broken, beat, and scarred, show the love of God. Be the body of Christ, scars and all.

Amen.