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### **“Banned Books: Lawn Boy”**

I came across the idea of doing a sermon series on banned books a few months ago when I read on Facebook that another Presbyterian pastor was doing it. I was immediately intrigued, especially since a group of parents in the Northwest Allen County School district had just recently sought to ban Maya Angelou’s book [Why the Caged Bird Sings](#).

Book bans, which is when a library removes a book from its collection, and book challenges, which is when someone challenges a book being a part of a library’s collection in an attempt to get it banned, nearly doubled from 2020 to 2021. In Tennessee, state legislators removed 300 books from library shelves, of which the majority centered around LGBTQ books or those the district labeled as “black lives matter”. In Oklahoma, [Summer Boismier, a former high school teacher in Oklahoma](#), resigned in opposition to a new state law that bans certain race and gender concepts from schools, and the Oklahoma Secretary of Education Ryan Walters has called for her teaching license to be revoked.

[Librarians are becoming targets](#). When Amanda Jones, a middle-school librarian in Louisiana spoke up against book banning at a local library board meeting, she became the target of an online harassment campaign calling her a "pervert" and "sick pig."

And in Texas a school district [pulled all books from library shelves and classrooms](#) that were challenged by parents, lawmakers and other community members in the last year — including the Bible. Which, let’s be totally honest, if the number one reason for banning a book is because it has material considered to be sexually explicit, the Bible should be banned. Why, just look at the story Carrie read and that I’m preaching on today. Jacob had two wives, and two female servants. And, in fact, the Bible has been banned throughout history. Hitler sought to remove the Old Testament from the Bible. And slave owners sought to redact certain stories from the Bible so their slaves didn’t get any “big ideas”.

So throughout history people have sought to censor stories that didn't align with their worldview – and religious people have been a primary instigator of that.

But do we need the reminder that Jesus' primary mode of teaching was telling stories, stories that sought to expand people's minds and deepen their insights? Yes, I think we do. Jesus knew that stories help us to make sense of our lives and our world. Stories then, and stories now are how we communicate with others; they help us to process what has or is happening; they help to shape us; they help us understand the meaning of life, death, and grief that we all experience. They show us what kindness and compassion look like, and what they don't look like; and mercy, grace and forgiveness, too. They also give us insight into our brokenness, and injustices toward others. **In short, stories tell us what it means to be fully human. So when we attempt to ban another person's story, we deny them their humanness. Put into religious terms, we deny that they are created in the image of God.**

**Which means banning books not only endangers society, it endangers our faith, too.** Hence, a sermon series on banned books and the Bible.

Today's book is *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison. *Lawn Boy* was the second most challenged or banned book in 2021. The reasons cited for banning or challenging it were its LGBTQ+ content and because it was considered to be sexually explicit. I thought it was a young adult novel but quickly learned it's a novel written for adults. In fact, it has won an [Alex Award](#), a distinction given each year (by the Young Adult Library Services Association) to novels written for adults that have a special appeal to teens.

Published in 2018, The New York Times Book Review called the novel's protagonist a "Holden Caulfield for a new millennium." (Holden Caulfield was the protagonist in [A Catcher in the Rye](#), which is also a frequently challenged book.) And this could be why I liked [Lawn Boy](#) so much because I was a fan of [Catcher in the Rye](#). [The Washington Post praised](#) Evison for taking a "battering ram to stereotypes of race and class" while creating a work "full of humor and hope."

The book follows Mike Muñoz, a young Mexican-American man struggling to find his place in a society rife with racism and class inequality. Mike, a yard worker with a real talent for topiary and a genuine love for landscaping, is sacked after refusing to comply with a client's orders to pick-up after his dog. As he attempts

to find job after job, Mike finds refuge in the one place that will accept him: the library. He contemplates writing the “Great American Landscaping Novel”, but realizes that’s not possible for people like him: people who, “had bills to pay. Cars to fix. Disabled siblings to care for.”

Now, this book is about many things: chasing the American dream and the difficulty of chasing that dream when ethnic background, gender identity, class, and education all collide; and how to face and overcome challenges when you encounter all of that collision. But the piece I want to lift up is how conflicted Mike Munoz is about who he is, and how he wrestles with that throughout the book – because there’s a correlation there with our faith. Mike was labeled a Mexican by Americans, but not really Mexican by Mexicans. He tries to overcome the social class distinctions people keep throwing him, but finds that’s nearly impossible to do. You’re poor, you’re just a guy who mows lawns, you’re the son of a single mom, you’ll never make anything of yourself – all of these labels are hurled at Mike. At times he’s angry, and at other times sarcastic, and many times I wanted to shake him and say “just embrace who you are”! But that’s so hard to do when you have all these voices coming at you telling you who you are!

In today’s scripture reading we hear about a man who also struggled his whole life embracing who he was. He was Jacob, and he fought being a who God created him to be from the time he was born to the night he wrestled with God and walked away from the match limping; finally accepting that he was who he was, and it was time to stop fighting that fact.

Now Jacob, if you don’t know, had a twin brother named Esau with whom he had a tumultuous relationship. When they were young, Jacob convinced Esau to sell him his birthright, and later he tricked their Dad into blessing him instead of Esau; which may not sound like a big deal to us, but trust me, it was a very big deal. In fact, he secured that blessing by lying to his Dad about who he was.

For you see, Jacob not only resisted who God wanted him to be, he resisted everyone else, too . . . a little like Mike Munoz. He looked upon everyone he met, including God, as some sort of antagonist. Up until the night he wrestled with God, Jacob would view everyone he met as an adversary . . . a little like Mike Munoz -- someone with whom they had to contend.

For example, after lying to his father and cheating his brother, Jacob fled to his uncle's house. There he married Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, had many children, and prospered. But his success was due to another lie; he'd been stealing Laban's sheep out from under him. But when he'd accumulated so much wealth it was embarrassing, he fled again while Laban was away. Jacob gathered everything he had in the middle of the night and, just for good measure, sent his wife Rachel back to the house to steal her family's valuables.

So once again, he's on the run, and still living with the threat of Esau retaliating against him 20 years after cheating him out of that blessing. Jacob knows his brother is out there somewhere, and keeps his eyes peeled for him. It's at this point that he decides to divide his entourage into two, so he sends his wives, children, and possessions across the desert and stays behind on his own to wait for his brother. But don't be fooled into thinking this was a selfless act on Jacob's part; he did it because he didn't want to lose all his stuff in a battle with Esau. Plus, he tries to appease Esau in order to save his own skin by offering to give him all his possessions, including his children and wives.

But before he hears back as to whether Esau accepts his offer, he sits down alone, guilty and terrified with only his own thoughts to keep him company – which, is not always a good place to be.

It was there, in the middle of the night, when an intruder, a man who will not be identified but who we assume to be God, wrestles him until dawn. All through the night they struggle, and at times it even appears that Jacob is winning when the unnamed stranger (believed to be God) cries out to be let go.

But then, in a quick reversal, the stranger touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, which cripples Jacob and leaves him helpless. For the first time in his life, his lying and conniving will not save him and he has to own up to who he really is.

It's enough for Jacob to cry out for a blessing, because for the first time in his life he realizes that he's been struggling with God, fighting God his whole life and fighting against who God has made him to be.

Friends, this is the struggle of faith, and it's real, especially if we take our faith seriously. The ultimate struggle so many of us face, if we're being honest, is whether we're going to trust God with our lives and who God has created us to

be; or whether, like Jacob, we're going to keep grasping for control of the uncontrollable, denying the very person God has created us to be.

This is the way the late Jesus scholar Marcus Borg describes faith. He says it is much more than just believing the correct things in our heads. Faith is also giving our heart and trust, our radical trust, to God. He draws on the work of Soren Kierkegaard, who says that "faith as trust is like floating on a deep ocean. Faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. If you struggle, if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink. But if you relax and trust, you will float."

This is a good analogy for faith, especially after summer when so many of you spent time at the lake.

I used to spend time on Spofford Lake, which is in New Hampshire. Five generations of my family loved the lake. I can remember swimming in the lake so much as a little girl, that when I went to sleep at night I still felt like I was bobbing up and down in the water.

My own kids swam just as much as I used to. And they, too, told me about having that same sensation when falling asleep at night.

Terry and I used to have a rule that in order to swim without your life vests, the kids had to pass the swim test, which involved jumping off the dock and swimming to the raft and back. It was about 10-12 feet from the dock to the raft, which isn't a huge distance, but when you're young it seems big. Plus, you never knew what killer bass or blue gill might nip at your toes.

When someone decided to take the swim test, it was a proud moment. He or she would drop the life vest on the deck and go for it, jumping feet first off the dock just like the big kids do. But inevitably a little bit of panic would set in, and they would begin to tense up. And what did Terry and I say? "It's okay, just relax. You'll float, it's okay,"

Friends, that's what faith is. It's "trusting in the buoyancy of God." Trusting God to be your life vest so that you can be the person God created you to be no matter what other people say. Trusting that God will keep you afloat, even when you're panicking, tensing up, and (perhaps even) starting to doubt whether you should claim your God given self or not.

After the wrestling match, Jacob gets a new name, Israel. Israel means both “God strives” and “the one who strives with God”. You see, we cannot face our struggles alone. We need God to be there with us. When Jacob went on his way that morning to meet Esau, God went with him tied, in a symbolic sort of way, at the hip. They are bound together and face their future together. God does that with us, too. We may struggle with who we are, and we may struggle with God and we may even walk away from that struggle limping. But we do not go it alone.

At the end of Lawn Boy, when Mike finally embraces who he is, he proclaims: “Whoever you are, whatever your last name is, wherever you came from, whichever way you swing, whatever is standing in your way, just remember: You’re bigger than that.”

In the church we say it this way: you are God’s beloved child. So wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God’s assurance that you belong to the God who created you. And that is enough, it is more than enough to lift you on the days you struggle, and to trust God to hold you when you do.

Amen.