

Genesis 32:22-31
Matthew 14:13-21

word count: 1,745

Jacob is a polygamist, a scoundrel, a schemer and one whose desire for the acquisition of land, goods and power will stop at nothing, not even sacred family bonds and trust. Otherwise, we are meant to assume from the placement of his story in Genesis, that he must be a pretty decent guy in some respects in order to play such a pivotal role in our faith history.

Just before today’s story begins, after taking two wives and two concubines and fathering eleven of his twelve children, he has slipped out of town in the dead of night with all of them, including a flock or two of his uncle Laban’s. When Laban follows him and confronts Jacob as to why he did this, Jacob essentially says with honesty, “Because I was afraid of what you might do if you caught me.” He justifies what he has done by reminding Laban of the work he has performed for the past twenty years. Now, he wants to transfer some livestock to the brother whom he cheated out of his inheritance, but left behind to be caretaker to it all these long years, as a peace offering. “Hi, Esau, I’m back. I brought you something. Thanks, love you, mean it, get off my land.”

Now Jacob is alone for the night, and we hear that a man wrestles with him until morning, and Jacob prevails, although he comes away with a badly dislocated hip and limps for the rest of his life. He wrestled with God and he actually won. Furthermore, his name is now “Israel.” Now, this is the story the truth of which only Jacob knows, and as he is alone at this point, we are left to wonder about his facts. He slips away from his family and comes back the next day injured. Knowing his character, it could just as easily be that he went off with a couple of bottles of Two-Shekel Chuck. He slipped off a rock while dancing and made up a story later to save face, one where he claims to have actually seen the face of God after wrestling with him. Whatever happened, it is a tall-tale even for his day.

However, like today’s story from Matthew, both share a richness in metaphors about blessing, inclusion, plenty and grace.

Jacob has asked the mysterious man or angel he wrestles with for a blessing. What happened the last time he asked for a blessing? He deceived his own father into giving him one. Jacob understands that he is not a character of notable morals. He desperately wants to know that he can be blessed even as the faulty person he is, by a higher power, and he chases that blessing in a struggle that will mark him for life. Jacob pursues his goals wholeheartedly.

Discovering our true identity as people who can claim to be a fully included part of this creation involves struggle — a life-long struggle to peel back the layers of a false self in order to expose who we are authentically in the image of God. That image of God, however, is contained in our ordinary human lives, signified in this story by Jacob’s limp. This story of transformation indicates that the journey to “a new name” is often marked by struggle. As transgender people can testify, like Jacob we often bear the marks of that struggle in our own physical, emotional and spiritual identity. I have people in my life, and perhaps you have some in yours, who have changed their names later in life in order to let go of old concepts about themselves, and embrace a new truth about who they are and to whom they belong. Maybe with our without changing your name, you have recognized that you occupy a new identity in your understanding of self and your connection to the God with whom you wrestle. Perhaps you are still wrestling like so many of us. □ □

It is easy these days to find a church community that tells you what the truth is – and then asks you to blindly follow it. But often, this truth is nothing more than the cultural beliefs of a people, and has little, if no connection, to what we feel within our own center to be true. To wrestle with God so that one can see God face-to-face requires the risk of losing the certainties of life. The mystery of what “God” actually is leaves much room for complexity. Such an encounter may mean we walk away limping – an injury caused when one abandons the false crutches we once called truth, or an injury awaiting us from the community of faith we come from when we challenge preconceived truths about God.

Sometimes, however, those injuries and scars are proud marks of making it through the struggle — of demanding the blessing at all costs. In Indigenous African religions and Native American tribal cultures, initiation marks are cut and displayed openly as signs of being part of the community. These rituals must surely say something about wearing the scars we bear as humans outwardly. There are those in the LGBT community who have struggled, risked, and wrestled without giving up in the struggle to take a seat at the table. Their scars, worn openly in the face of their oppressors as a constant reminder of the struggle and the refusal to back down, are also signs of belief to others that there is hope in wrestling, even with God or the ideas about God or religion that have been passed down to us.

How do you identify with Jacob’s struggle and limp? How do you wrestle with yourself or with others? Are you confronted with ego issues every day—“where” you find yourself placed in this culture due to work, age, family, health? Does your wrestling have to do with regrets or recriminations, hurts or doubts about your own worth or place at the table of life? What scars do you bear yourself, whether they are worn outward or inward?

Is it a daily struggle? Are there times when you wonder if you belong at all?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has just heard about the beheading of his cousin John. There are two very different banquets happening here. First, at the palace, Herod was holding a banquet and promised the daughter of Herodias whatever she wanted, and what she desired was the head of John the Baptist. Her wish was carried out right away, which saddened many including Herod, and the sight of the head on a platter no doubt put quite a damper on the banquet.

Juxtaposed against this is another kind of banquet. After hearing about John, Jesus comes ashore in front of the waiting crowds and tells his disciples that they should not have to go in search of food, but rather they should be fed right here and now.

At hand? Five loaves and two fish. How many? The story says that there were five thousand men, and we might assume there were as many women and children.

The scholars of the Jesus Seminar will tell you that this story did not happen. Common sense tells us that 10,000 people won’t be satisfied with five loaves of bread and two fish. Apologists in the past have tried to get away with telling us that these were giant fish and huge loaves of bread. Others will explain it by saying that with Jesus, miracles just happen, and those people were fed.

The Preachers’ Preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor has a problem with miracles □that “mesmerize” us and lead us to leave everything up to God. “Miracles,” she writes, “let us off the hook. □They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all.” Somewhere along the line, it has to be us who feel inclined to make miracles happen by working for a kind of justice that ensures that all creation is fed and cared for, and in believing that we can become the kind of people that can make it so.

No, I think the hidden metaphor in the story is simply this—Jesus’ action prefigures what he meant to convey when he shared bread and wine with his disciples at the last supper. This is

the kind of Eucharist where everyone is invited to the table, even Jacob with all of his wrestling with his own character and with God. Even us, wrestling with our own understanding of how we fit into this story that we come to hear professed, and even with our wrestling with what “God” means to us, and who Jesus really was. There is no “bouncer” with a velvet rope, no character check, no exclusion based on any of the “isms” that can separate us from the welcome table.

Just like the meal that we are about to take part in symbolically, Jesus took the elements he had on hand (because it really doesn’t matter what you use) “...he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”

Leftovers. The welcome table will never be empty is what the story says to me. Everyone was fed, and there will be more ready for those who want to be filled with the symbols of spiritual nourishment, provided they are given away recklessly to all that desire them.

The word “companion” is derived from the Latin, *con pan*, “with bread.” Only companions, compadres, comrades... share bread. When I share bread with you, then that substance that enters my body to nourish my physical life is the same substance that enters your body to nourish your physical life. This holds true with Communion, which spiritually nourishes both our lives when we partake together as companions. Breaking and partaking of bread testifies to our mutual need for physical and spiritual life. Becoming companions in eating bread occurs regardless of our gender, race, ethnicity, economic class or sexual orientation. We all need physical and spiritual life. Even if we have to constantly wrestle with what that means for us.

You are invited to this table. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey you are welcome here.

Sermon Resource

Out in Scripture, Human Rights Campaign

Scripture for Sunday, August 3, 2008 Proper 13A

Genesis 32:22-31

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. **23** He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. **25** 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. **26** Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." **27** So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." **28** Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." **29** Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. **30** So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." **31** The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. **14** When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. **15** When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." **16** Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." **17** They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." **18** And he said, "Bring them here to me." **19** Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. **20** And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. **21** And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.