

## Scripture and Message from 6 August 2023

Scripture: Genesis 31:22-31 (Matthew 14:13-21)

**Prayer for Illumination:** Fed on the wisdom of God's word, let us strive toward the goal of seeing God face to face. May God touch our minds with understanding, that we may sense Christ's presence in the struggles and wounds of life. Amen.

### Scripture Reading Genesis 32:22-31 FET

<sup>22</sup> In the course of the night, Jacob arose, took the entire caravan, and crossed the ford of the Yabbok River. <sup>23</sup> After Jacob had crossed the ford with all of his possessions, he returned to the camp, <sup>24</sup> and he was completely alone.

And there, someone wrestled with Jacob until the first light of dawn. <sup>25</sup> Seeing that Jacob could not be overpowered, the other struck Jacob at the socket of the hip, and the hip was dislocated as they wrestled.

<sup>26</sup> Then Jacob's contender said, "Let me go, for day is breaking."

Jacob answered, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

<sup>27</sup> "What is your name?" the other asked.

"Jacob," he answered.

<sup>28</sup> The other said, "Your name will no longer be called 'Jacob,' or 'Heel-Grabber,' but 'Israel' – 'Overcomer of God' – because you have wrestled with both God and mortals, and you have prevailed."

<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked, "Now tell me your name, I beg you."

The other said, "Why do you ask me my name" – and blessed Jacob there.

<sup>30</sup> Jacob named the place Peniel – "Face of God" – "because I have seen God face to face, yet my life was spared."

<sup>31</sup> At sunrise, Jacob left Peniel, limping along from the injured hip.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Message: Wrestling

Wrestling with God – have you wrestled with God? For me I most often wrestle with God about my family life. Wrestling with wanting a family of my own when I was single, wrestling with being a stay-at-home mom. Wrestling with David's illness and the need to move and return to full time ministry and **no longer** being a stay-at-home mom. Wrestling with the decision to pursue a Doctorate, and then wrestling with the decision to drop out of the program. I have also wrestled with the world and our 'culture wars.' What does it mean that so many feel so misused and abused. How do I continue to listen with love to those who love MAGA and those who want to dismantle our country from both extremes. How do I love those who believe the world, the country, and that I owe them a living – food, shelter, and recreational alcohol or drugs of choice - without there being any expectation of taking responsibility for themselves? How do I love those who sit in their empty parking lots, chained by bitterness, and hurt, and hate? I wrestle. I wrestle with the expectations of the world.

But unlike so many of my siblings in ministry, I have never until recently wrestled with my calling. Right now, in this post-COVID, post Christian world, I am wrestling with what it means to be a pastor – or maybe more importantly, what it means to be church. I have been

wrestling with the United Methodist denomination's slow divorce and the losing of churches and pastors from under our big theological tent. What does it mean for so many people to want to leave? And then I look around and I miss seeing an entire generation of people who have not returned to church; maybe never really belonged to church. And I wonder what does it mean for our church, this congregation...and I wrestle with the questions of what it means to be church, what does it mean to be a pastor in this post-Covid; post-Christian world.

Jacob wrestled one night, but there are many questions around who or what he was wrestling. If you recall from our stories of the last few weeks, Jacob ran away from home, urged on by his mother, because he had stolen the blessing that was rightly due to his brother, Esau. And Esau didn't take it well. To say the least. So, Jacob high-tailed it out of town. He headed off to some cousins in the swinging town of *Paddam-aram*. The town where his mother Rebecca grew up with her family and her brother Laban. Laban who tricked Jacob and was tricked in return since every time Laban tried to change Jacob's wages, Jacob still received the better deal.

Jacob did well there and now he is heading back with wives and concubines and children galore, but also livestock and servants and more wealth than anyone could shake a stick at. And least that is what Jacob hopes, since the last time he saw his brother - in the rearview mirror - he was shaking big sticks. So, he's come back to show that he is a bigger man than he was. He has done well, which must mean God is blessing him. And if God is blessing him, then surely Esau could too.

Our passage begins "The same night..." It was the same day as the setting aside of what is essentially a bribe for Esau. He is sending ahead a gift so overwhelming that no one could stay mad at the giver. At least that is what Jacob hopes.

So, he sends off the bribe - I mean the gift. And then he sends his wives and children on ahead so that he can sit and contemplate his fate all night long. And a man, says the story, a man wrestled with him all night long. Who is this man? It doesn't really say - clearly anyway. Oh, we look at the words this mysterious man says when he renamed Jacob "You have striven with God..." And we say it must have been God; Jacob wrestled with God. Others say that it was a representative of God, an angel who wrestled Jacob there on Jabbok's Ford.

The story says, "a man. And the naming says, "You have striven with God and humans and have prevailed." *And with humans*. What if it wasn't God after all? What if Jacob was wrestling with himself: his hopes, his dreams, his doubts and his fears. This sounds familiar; wrestling with oneself is a common sport after all.

When I was wrestling with God and myself over what it means to be single and looking for a family - when I was wrestling with finding a man, I could have a mature relationship with, hopefully leading to marriage - I served as a chaperone for the Conference Youth Washington DC trip. This was a weeklong event to DC where we studied a Social Justice Issue with the help of the staff of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society. This Board is located in the only non-government property on Capitol Hill. It is adjacent to the Capitol and the Supreme Court. Some of the issues we studied and wrestled with were the separation of church and state, human sexuality, freedom of religion and teenage depression and suicide.

These were youth events, so sleep was optional. We always had a great time, and I always came back exhausted and filled. I wanted to sleep for a week, and I was energized again for ministry. I came back on a spiritual high but was physically worn out. I was blessed but exhausted. And my blessings came to me through the generous faith of the youth, the knowledge and wisdom of the staff leading us, and even from the random people we encountered in Washington. I still remember when as we left a Chinese restaurant with all of the food we

ordered but could not finish, how the youth approached some homeless people and engaged them in a discussion while giving them our left-overs. I'll never forget how those kids treated people I was wary of, and how the street people engaged so beautifully with the youth.

Blessings cost something: time and energy and effort. No, I'm not talking about a transaction, about buying our blessings. I'm talking about the reality that blessings don't usually come to us when we are reclining and at our ease. Instead, we sense blessings when we expend ourselves, when we pour ourselves out in service, when we engage in some effort, and yeah, sometimes it feels like wrestling with the very ones we are trying to serve, the very ones who will bless us if we keep at it—if, like Jacob, we refuse to let go. Despite the pain, despite the struggle, despite the sapping of energy, we hold on for the blessing. And it will come. That's part of the promise and the hope. That's part of the joy and the peace.

Now, there doesn't seem to be any wrestling in the story of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's Gospel. But I think in this story we and the disciples are called to wrestle with **our presuppositions and our prejudices**. That's never an easy exercise. Another way of looking at the wrestling happening in this story is to see the **disciples wrestling with responsibility, wrestling with hospitality**. Send them away, they told Jesus, so they can take care of their own hunger (*v.15*). A proper response, it would seem to most of us. Give them space to deal with their own needs. In our individualistic culture, that is the way we have of honoring everyone's freedom, or maybe it is the way we have of not really wanting to be our brothers' keepers; of not really wanting to have any responsibility for 'them.'

Jesus has a different response. **You might even say that he tells the disciples to not let go of the hungry ones until they have blessed you.** Or is that assuming too much? **Or should it be that the hungry ones won't let go until they get the blessing that they want and need? Or a both/and kind of situation? Where is the blessing? How is the blessing shared?** That's one of those abiding questions before us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another question is, "Will this cost us?" We can clearly see that it will cost us. **That is the disciples' fear. We don't have enough; we couldn't possibly meet this need.** Jesus asks them and us to think again. *We may limp, like Jacob, before we have finished wrestling with this problem*, but maybe the blessing is woven into the limping. Or maybe the limping becomes a sign of the blessing.

Like Jacob who believed he saw the face of God in his struggle, we are reminded that in meeting the needs of the hungry before us, we are also seeing the face of God. As we do it to those who some consider the least of these, the ones who can't pay you back, the ones who haven't earned their bread and fish but just receive it and, surprisingly, share it, we do it for Jesus and to Jesus. Remember, Matthew tells us a little later in the Gospel (Matt 25), that whenever and wherever we feed the hungry, we feed Jesus.

Jacob thought he saw the face of God in the wrestling, but the story continues and Jacob truly sees the face of God reflected in Esau's face when Esau forgives him and welcomes him home. Esau didn't forgive Jacob because Jacob was now rich; he didn't forgive him because of all the gifts that were sent; Esau didn't even forgive Jacob just because God favored Jacob; **no**, Esau forgave Jacob because he was his brother, his sibling, his family and because Esau had learned that forgiveness isn't transactional. You don't forgive in order to get; you don't bribe people with forgiveness or bribe people in order to get them to forgive you. Forgiveness is a gift. It is grace. It is a form of love. It is what we can hope to receive – no – what we know we can receive when we, like Jacob, put aside all our fears and wrestling, and finally come into the presence of the one who calls us beloved children and welcomes us home.