

Wrestling and Blessing

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Genesis 32.22-31;
 Psalm 17.1-7, 15;
 Romans 9.1-5;
 Matthew 14.13-21

Have you ever heard someone toss off the phrase “We are so blessed” as a way to explain or respond to good fortune? I’ve done it. That’s the thought that goes through my mind when I remember how we made budget as a congregation through those lean years of recession or to describe how I felt when I think about how Andrew and I eventually found jobs that we love and that are meaningful and use our gifts and support our family. “We are so blessed.”

I know what I intend by that statement. I intend to express my gratitude. I’m trying to acknowledge God’s grace. I’m trying to avoid the arrogance that claims good fortune as something I deserve or have earned. These are all good intentions but think the impact of that equation: making budget = blessed by God; having good jobs = blessed by God...really? So what about the church down the street that didn’t make budget? What about the people who can’t find meaningful work and are stuck in a job that sucks the life out of them or doesn’t have a job at all and struggles to make ends meet? Are they not blessed? Do you follow the trajectory all the way and conclude that they are somehow cursed? And is blessing really tied that closely to financial and material prosperity?

To be fair, we come by this association between blessings and good fortune quite honestly. There is a long line of biblical stories and teachings that set up that equation quite clearly with good fortune as a sign of God’s blessing and bad fortune as a sign of God’s curse. Thankfully, the scriptures themselves begin to question that inherited theology. The book of Job being the most pointed among them.

Jacob's story that we've been following for weeks now assumes this association between blessing and prosperity. Jacob knows that the birthright and blessing of his father belongs to Esau as the oldest son and that blessing and that birthright are all about financial and material possessions. Jacob, by virtue of his position in the family and the structure of inheritance in his day, he has to hustle for the kind of security that would just be handed to Esau. While his tactics may be devious and underhanded his need for security is deeply human. And it's his anxiety and fear that drives so much of the drama that seems to follow Jacob everywhere he goes.

He left his homeland in fear for his life because of the treacherous way he had treated his brother. He goes to live with Laban to start a family and finds himself on the receiving end of some treachery and returns it in kind and leaves that place looking over his shoulder. Just as he settles things with Laban he has to contend with the wrath he fears from Esau as he tries to return home. Just before our text today, Jacob sends an emissary with gifts and a message to appease his brother. Finally, Jacob finds himself alone on the shores of the Jabbok river.

This has to be one of the passages of scripture with the largest volume of commentary. So much about it that draws us in as readers. We hear that Jacob is left alone and then told that a man shows up out of nowhere and wrestled with him until daybreak. We have so many questions: first of all, who is this man and why are they wrestling to begin with and how can they possibly wrestle through an entire night. The text never says but by the end of it Jacob believes that he has seen the face of God.

Even those not prone toward reading scripture as metaphor have to see the meaning of this wrestling is about far more than physical altercation with some stranger in the night. Jacob is wrestling with who he has been up onto this point. He is wrestling with his understanding of God and (whether he knows it or not) with the very notion of blessing that he has been searching after his whole life. In this dark of night wrestling Jacob shows up as he has lived his life; in his scrappy-full-on-I-will-take-what-is-mine-and-will-not-let-go kind of engagement.

And for all the ways that Jacob is sketchy and devious and seems to lose his moral compass if it means getting ahead, God does not let him go. In fact, God sees in him the beginning of a people who will be light to the world. And I cannot help but wonder whether it is precisely this tenacity in Jacob that God loves even as God is eager to reshape the understanding of blessing that Jacob holds. Jacob is wrestling to secure his prosperity where God is looking to transform his identity: "You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."

What I hear beneath his new name is an invitation to stop striving so hard or at least to stop striving with such an anxious grasping quality to it. In the end, the blessing God offers him has nothing to do with securing his financial prosperity and everything to do with reminding him who he is as one who is beloved of God; who can strive after what he needs - can strive against Almighty God and *still* God will not let him go.

At the end of the day is that not our deepest anxiety? That God will let us go? That we are not in fact loved? That God does not hear or see or care about the deep unmet needs of our life? This story begins to show us God's hand and reveals to us a bit of God's heart: who it is that God pays attention to; who it is that God stands with - and its' not just the powerful and the successful, the oldest who stand to inherit, the ones who make budget and have meaningful jobs.

Those are not the signs of God's blessing. That's just good fortune. Lovely when it comes; enjoy it for sure and then use it for good! God scans for those who are NOT in positions of privilege and power in order to reveal to all of us that God's blessing is something else all together. It sits in a far deeper place and cannot be taken away. It cannot be touched by bad fortune anymore than it can be enhanced by good. Sometimes it can only be received and discovered after a long and arduous night of wrestling.

What I love about this story is the word of encouragement to those of us who are long term wrestlers...who do not accept easy answers, who keep pressing the hard questions, who struggle and strive and keep holding out

for the blessing that we know belongs to us but cannot seem to find. God looks on us with love.

As the gospels reveals, Jesus is both a fellow wrestler and one who embodies the posture of God's blessing. I don't know if you've ever thought of Jesus as a fellow wrestler but I have come to see him in that light. He both loves the scriptures and traditions he received as a Jewish boy being raised in the faith and he wrestled with them to uncover deeper insight than had been revealed before. He pushed against those traditions and went toe to toe with those hiding behind systems of privilege and power.

And when he found his heart overcome with grief, he retreated to a quiet place to wrestle with God in prayer which he was on his way to do at the start of our passage for today. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." You have to look back to know what the "THIS" is that he heard. What he heard was that his cousin, John, the one who made the way for his ministry, the one through whom he received God's word of blessing; John's just been killed, be-headed by the power of Rome.

When you know that Jesus was overcome with grief and eager for some space alone to wrestle with God, it makes this portrait of his compassion all the more poignant. Even in his own heartache – perhaps because of it – the deep needs of the crowd pull forward his compassion. Their need for a Word from God, their need for healing, and later for nourishment pulls the compassion of God right out of him.

He reveals that they don't need to look to Rome for their bread. Rome claimed politically and religiously¹ to be the bread basket of the world. Jesus reveals that as they give thanks to God for their daily bread and they share justly the harvests of the earth – as they meet the needs of the world with the compassion of God's heart – there will be enough and as that beautiful saying goes: "Enough is as good as a feast!"

¹ Jae Won Lee Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, Volume 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 311.

Well, I don't know where these texts meet you today. Maybe you are in one of those vulnerable places where you have been wrestling through the night and need a word of blessing. Perhaps you can tuck into your heart as I invited the children to do that image of Jesus bending down to look at you with the fullness of his attention. Carry that with you into this week.

Or maybe you simply need the assurance that God looks on you in all of your scrappy-full-on-I-will-take-what-is-mine-and-will-not-let-go ways with a heart full of love. And maybe hear from this Word that you don't have to strive quite so hard, because God's got you. Maybe you can let go just a little because God will not let go.

Or maybe it was that last bit that captured your imagination; the part about Rome claiming to be the bread basket of the world and Jesus sitting with these crowds far apart from those centers of power showing a very different way for the needs of the world to be met through the compassion of God.

Here is what I know and what I trust deep in my bones: no matter who we are or where we find ourselves, God will meet us and will wrestle with us if need be until we receive the blessing that is ours.

Thanks be to God!