

Ninth Sunday of Pentecost, Year A, August 2, 2020

PRELUDE

WELCOME / CALL TO WORSHIP: "Christ Be our Light" (handout)

SCRIPTURE (Zach)

Genesis 32:22-31

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 14:13-21

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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

HYMN AFTER SCRIPTURE: "Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It" (#285)

SERMON

“...His child forever I am” we sing.

I am going to start with a quote that I have taped on the inside cover of my Bible. It is from Christina Villa, a UCC minister in Cleveland. She writes:

The Bible is full of people who don't know what to believe, who change their minds, and start and stop believing. When you read the Bible with your mind not made up, you find real people in there, people you can learn from. But you have to read their stories without your mind made up, or else all you'll learn is what you already think you know.

We are...children...before God. Continuing to learn.

And Ahhhhhh Jacob! Isn't he a child continuing to learn?

I mean, what a character! Kate Huey describes Jacob in her Stillspeaking commentary this way: “the patriarch who hardly qualifies for sainthood, to put it mildly. Part of us is repelled by the way he lies and cheats his way to success and wealth, and part of us may feel strangely drawn toward him, and might even see something of ourselves in him.”

Now let me add here: we've been focusing on the Gospel in this time of worship, and we haven't shared the Jacob narrative there in the middle of Genesis, but take a read—it's quite a story.

So here we find a nervous Jacob, returning to his brother whom he cheated out of fortune and power. “Jacob was left alone,” the text reads, “and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Who or what is Jacob wrestling with? Is this God he's wrestling with? An angel? Some commentaries even suggest that because this “man” fears the daylight and refuses to divulge its name, it may draw on the ancient tradition of “nocturnal demons.” Or is he wrestling with inner struggles that arise from his responses to the events that life has thrown at him?

The answer? Yes.

I say “yes” because I think each of us could recognize a time of wrestling with each of those options— we wrestle with God to be certain—constantly facing those big questions about who or what God is and how shall we live and why do certain things happen and...

Likewise, we wrestle with our own culture's tradition of “demons”, our cultural norms of violence and sex and gluttony, our selfishness and self-centeredness, our dehumanization of others—all so distant from God's will of justice and compassion.

And of course our inner struggles, those parts of ourselves that stay out of the light and we face only in times of personal reflection. Yes, yes, yes, we've all wrestled. We all wrestle.

And "AMEN!" for the opportunity!

See, I believe God seeks—actively seeks—openings in our lives through which the Holy Spirit can work. What's the Leonard Cohen line? *There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in...* Be those cracks, those openings, intense face-to-face confrontations like Jacob's,

...or... more like the situation that arose in the desert with Jesus. Here is a crowd of people that leave home and security and head into a deserted place to follow this man?

What are these people looking for? What are they hoping to hear, or to see? Yes, each of them—"five thousand plus women and children" the text reads-- They too are seeking an opening for God's light to get in. Perhaps a blessing, perhaps some clarity on who this man is that they've heard so much about—

...and God provides...but the opening they receive is not what they were looking for. Not what they "wanted"—or "perceived they needed", but what they truly needed.

See, to bear witness to a "miracle" is a passive action in the past tense. It is a word used for after the fact. So say "I witnessed a miracle" is full of wonder, yes, but it is not an opening for the light to get in.

In her book "Seeds of Heaven", Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *"miracles 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"*

I can't say definitively what happened that day...Maybe it was the hand of God, but I can tell you I wouldn't leave home and follow some guy into the desert without bringing a little food and water of my own...

What I do know is that the crowd was hungry and was fed, what I do know that when Jesus said "sit" they sat, they didn't run home... the opening this crowd found was that with a bit of trust, and a shift from focusing on the scarcity of what they don't have to the capacity of utilizing what is present and making due... all were cared for.

All can be cared for, friends.

Call it a miracle... but a miracle is just "a great wonder" that is difficult to explain. God is looking for openings where the God's light can come into you.

Friends, Jesus wasn't here to show off his ability to perform miracles. Jesus was here to show us the kingdom of heaven, both the kingdom in God's presence in our everyday lives, and the kingdom to come.

So let's call those miracles "openings" to receive God's light.

And it doesn't only happen when there is five thousand plus! God provides these miracles—all the time! And it happens, like Jacob, when you let yourself be face to face with the holy.

--I'm not talking about the miracle of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost descending—unless you count saying the right thing at the right time to the right person when you had no idea you had it in you, a miracle. It is an opening for God's light.

--I'm not talking about the miracle of manna from heaven, unless you count finding the right resources from the stuff of everyday life to fulfill the need present in another. It is an opening for God's light.

--I'm not talking about the miracles of curing like Jesus—unless you count the peace and presence and catharsis that arise after you let yourself completely go, break down, fall into tears. It is an opening for God's light.

Listen Friends, when you wrestle with God, holy things happen! When you get face to face with God and bring your whole self into the moment, truly seeking that opening of transcendence that God wishes for you, I promise you, you will find God.

And in hindsight, you will always be able to explain away your actions and experience with a bit of intellectual rigor, --but you did...what needed to be done, when the need was there... so that all may be fed by God's holy light.

You've heard the cliché' "90 percent of success is "showing up"—that is no different with faith. Ask yourself, where or how in your life do you find yourself face to face with God?

For some it is engagement in service to others, for some it is a retreat into prayer and meditation, for some it is the simple stuff of everyday life.

For Jesus, it is all of these! He teaches the simple stuff of life in the parables, he models the retreat into prayer as we hear accounts of him heading to a deserted place to pray, of course he engages those in need with acts of service. --I'm going to tell you, do all three! Get yourself face to face with God!

Here's another quote I read this week... from Richard Pervo in *New Proclamation*:
"What kind of God will get into a nighttime brawl with a mortal and come out no better than even? The answer? The kind of God we need!" The kind of God that asks us to put forward our best.... and respects us for putting forward our best.

Nobody said bringing your whole self to God would be easy—at least not here... oh there are plenty of churches that offer entertainment and sugar coated feel-good theology that lulls a person into a complacent, Sunday morning, frosting faith—but we're asking from this space, and from the mission being discerned in this church, that you do more than be entertained on Sunday.

Cut below the frosting into the whole stuff of life—that's an awful metaphor—let me try again: don't let your faith be a veneer, or varnish that simply covers a light external layer of the whole.

All of those things that you have to put together to build your whole life can also make yourself a whole person of faith—if, and only if, you get face to face with God. If and only if you allow yourself to go there with God.

I promise you... God will be there...

God will be present, not when it's convenient, not when you have time...that's not when you most need God! But God will be present in the busy morning when you're running late and have a big day ahead, God will be present when you're gripped with anger or grief or anxiety and the last thing on your mind, the last thing you want to do is to engage in faithful prayer...

God will be present in the moments of scarcity in your life. What does Jesus say in response to the scarcity of five loaves and two fish for five thousand plus? "Bring them here to me."

I think we know what Jesus does with things that we deem "scarcities" in our lives.

Question is: are we open to learning the lesson?

HYMN AFTER SERMON: "God of Grace and God of Glory" (#466)

COMMUNION: SOLO: "Flawless"

JOYS AND CONCERNS:

PASTORAL PRAYER / LORD'S PRAYER

CLOSING HYMN: "There's a Sunshine in My Soul Today" (#399)

POSTLUDE