

## **I will not let you go until you bless me**

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

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC in Camden; August 2, 2020

### Genesis 32:22-31

<sup>22</sup> *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. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then the man<sup>[g]</sup> said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,<sup>[b]</sup> for you have striven with God and with humans,<sup>[c]</sup> and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel,<sup>[d]</sup> saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

### Matthew 14: 13-21

<sup>13</sup> *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. <sup>14</sup> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup> They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." <sup>18</sup> And he said, "Bring them here to me." <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

When was the last time that you found yourself wrestling with God? Perhaps you witnessed an injustice and wondered how God could ever allow such a thing to happen? Or you saw a loved one get sick and you felt helpless and overwhelmed, wondering where God could be found in all this suffering. Perhaps you encountered a paradigm shift in which your old ways of making sense of the world and your own identity and purpose suddenly came into question. Maybe you are wrestling with how to square up your values and your vote in the up-coming national election. Perhaps you have been struggling with your sobriety as support networks and services have been curtailed. Or, perhaps you have been living with a regret or an ethical dilemma and don't know how to move forward, especially if speaking the truth may bring difficult

consequences. Wrestling with God can come in many forms and may often feel like we are wrestling with ourselves. Wrestling may be painful. It also means that we are alive and engaged!

Our scripture text from Genesis for today brings us face to face with such wrestling. Jacob is wrestling with God at a time in his life when he has come to what will either be a turning point or a dead end. Jacob has been a scoundrel. He has cheated his older twin brother Esau out of his birthright and their father Isaac's blessings. To escape Esau's wrath, Jacob took off to live with relatives, ostensibly in search of a suitable wife. He and his uncle worked together for years but had an uneven relationship involving more deceit in both directions.<sup>1</sup> Jacob has recently left with his own, and by now, large household of wives (Leah and Rachel), children, servants and livestock - tricking his uncle out of the best part of the flock. When we meet him in the story today, he is in search of a home and hopes to establish his own life and identity.

However, his past has caught up with him. Esau is after him with a small army. Jacob is scared and knows he does not stand a chance if it comes to a fight. So, Jacob divides up his livestock and family and sends them ahead of himself in groups hoping that sending animals as gifts and meeting family may soften up his irate brother. It fits a pattern of conniving to save his own derriere. But then Jacob has this astounding experience of wrestling with God on the night before he will face his brother. Jacob has been heir to the covenant God made with his ancestors by virtue of his deceit. He has not really appropriated it as his true identity. It has largely been an abstraction to Jacob but the wrestling match will change that.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob may be a scoundrel but he also has a searching and tenacious spirit. Jacob is so persistent that God ends up striking him on the hip. Jacob still hangs on and refuses to let go until this

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<sup>1</sup> For example, uncle Laban first makes Jacob work for him for seven years in exchange for being allowed to marry the younger daughter whom Jacob loves. However, Laban cheats Jacob into marrying the older daughter, Leah, first (too much booze on their wedding night and Jacob doesn't realize he is with the wrong woman). Jacob then has to serve another seven years to get Rachel. Of course, marrying first cousins, not allowing the women a say and polygamy add up to some colorful biblical "family values."

<sup>2</sup> Except for the recent dream of seeing angels ascending and descending from heaven, featured in our texts two weeks ago (Genesis 28:10-19a).

amazing presence has blessed him. That is a gutsy request and earns him a new name. He is now *Israel* which means the one who has wrestled with God and humans.<sup>3</sup> The focus in the encounter seems to be on presence and engagement. There are no words of condemnation. Notice how Jacob is still not certain what has just happened and asks for God's name. God asks back, "Why do you need to ask for my name?" Only then does Jacob understand fully that he has just been in the actual presence of God and survived. He now has a visceral experience of the grace of God and his covenant with God. Jacob will meet God face to face again in his brother, Esau, who forgives him and becomes open to renewing their bond.

This foundational story of an open-hearted and engaged relationship with God is also pertinent to Jesus's time and our own time. Just as Jacob's descendants continued this wrestling with God and humans, so do we amidst the challenges of our lives. This is especially true again today. For us as individuals and as a community, authentic knowing and relating with God and each other never happens in the abstract but is borne of experience. We have to show up and engage. In the Christian context, we meet God face to face in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus becomes the embodiment of a new covenant with God for us. This covenant is enacted in the Lord's Supper (Communion Sunday) and is made tangible in other occasions of meals in the Gospels.

Let us turn now to the story from Matthew which involves such a meal. In this story, Jesus refuses to let his followers and the people go until they have blessed him by blessing each other. This is a beautiful and fascinating adaptation of the story from Genesis. In the context of the Gospel story, Jesus has just received news of the murder of John the Baptist. John was killed for challenging King Herod on his ethics.<sup>4</sup> In his own grief, Jesus seeks some solitude but the crowds keep coming to him in search of healing and hope. They are in a deserted place and the disciples urge Jesus to send everyone into the villages to buy their own food because they don't want the responsibility of feeding the crowds. Jesus replies, "*They need not go away; you give*

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, Israel becomes the name of a whole people, the Israelites, who themselves will continue to wrestle with God amidst acts of beauty and betrayal.

<sup>4</sup> Herod had betrayed his brother and taken his wife who also plays a role in John the Baptist's death along with her daughter.

*them something to eat.*” Then he has them bring what is initially available, five loaves and two fish.<sup>5</sup> Jesus takes what has been given, blesses it, and has the food distributed among the thousands of people of all ages who have gathered. Amazingly all are fed and twelve baskets full of bread and fish are left over!

I have always thought that the main miracle in this story is that people have been moved by the Spirit to come together and share what they have brought. It is Jesus’ presence, prayer, teaching, and witness that moves them to opt for blessing each other with abundance. God adds to this grace so that there is even more left than Jesus started with. There is something in our common hunger and searching that can bring us together if we actually get in touch with what we are yearning for. If we are yearning for pseudo power and independence the way Jacob sought to live his life early on, we sow division. Some may gain material riches that way but are not all our hearts poorer for it aside from the sheer struggle of some to survive? What could become possible if we trusted in the abundance and providence of God instead? What if we refused to send away people who are hungry in more ways than one? How would we order our shared lives? Wrestling with these and other questions is a vital struggle at a time when our economy is in its worst down turn ever, millions are unemployed, and the recovery is still hampered by the pandemic and political divisions. It is a vital struggle when we find ourselves divided over issues of race and how to establish justice and peace in the land. It is so easy to choose dead ends and pull back, self-protect, or lash out. Can we heed God’s invitation to keep wrestling with each other at this turning point?

This week, I found myself heartened once again by the witness of the late Congressman John Lewis. You may have seen his essay in the New York Times which he wrote shortly before his death (to be published on the day of his funeral this week). He also knew something about being fed with the grace of God and feeding each other in a spirit of abundance. Lewis was

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers may reference the five books of the Torah (first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, including Genesis) and the two pillars of the Law (Torah) and the Prophets. The prophets always called Israel to be true to the covenant, to live justly and faithfully in relationship with God and each other. The twelve baskets may refer to both the twelve tribes of Israel (sons of Jacob, Leah, Rachel and maids) and the twelve apostles in Jesus’s context.

always wrestling with his faith and his love for this country, though not as a scoundrel. He was a man who tried to have the means of his actions align with the ends he sought. That took discipline and training. Like Christ, he was also a believer in non-violent action for the good of the whole. His work for justice was never only meant for people who looked like him but for all people who struggle. He let himself be blessed by the example of others. He wrote in this essay: *“While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me... Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity...”*

Lewis further invoked Martin Luther King with these words, *“He said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice... each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out ...Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.”* After urging us all to use our voting rights without taking them for granted, Lewis added, *“You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, through decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change ... Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe because we must put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others. Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe... Now it is your turn to let freedom ring ... So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”*

Because he knew himself to be blessed, John Lewis did not let go of us in our wrestling together for a more just world until he had a chance to bless us one more time. So let us engage in this wrestling and refuse to let go until we have become a blessing to each other. May we come to trust the love of God to sustain us in our sharing and our belonging throughout the tempests of our time, until we truly see Christ in all whom we meet.