

PENTECOST IX 2 August 2020 Proper 13A

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White at St Mark' Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Genesis 32.22-31; Psalm 17.1-7, 16; Romans 9.1-5; Matthew 14.13-21

This morning we hear another of the stories about Jacob --this one about his nighttime wrestling match with a stranger who is very clearly God and who has assumed human form. I am so sorry that Fr David is not here to preach on this marvelous narrative, because it is one of his favorite passages in all of the Scriptures.

Jacob is on his way to meet his twin brother Esau, whom he once swindled out of both his birth right as the elder twin and also out of their father's patriarchal blessing intended for the first born. When Jacob last saw Esau, Esau had been seeking murderous revenge, and so Jacob is terrified. He has separated from his family and sent them away in order to protect them from his brother's wrath, and is now by himself in a lonely place.

And in the Scriptures, lonely places are where human beings often encounter the Divine: Jesus frequently seeks them out, as we hear in the Gospel reading appointed for today. He has just learned that King Herod has had John the Baptist beheaded. He has also just been in his hometown of Nazareth where his former neighbors think that the little kid whom they once knew is now putting on airs as a teacher and healer and they want nothing to do with him, even though he is drawing great crowds of people who do want to hear him, see what miracles he can perform. Discouraged perhaps, angry, and also grieving John's brutal execution, Jesus withdraws to a solitary place, in order to care for himself, to pray, and to heal, and the crowds (if not his former neighbors) follow him.

In the lonely place where Jacob finds himself, he is suddenly in an all-night wrestling match with someone who cannot win against him but who dislocates Jacob's hip in order to end the match (this is cheating) just as dawn approaches so that the daylight will not allow Jacob to see God's face, which would be fatal to Jacob. Jacob seems to know who his powerful opponent is, and hanging onto him, insists on receiving a blessing before letting go. And as part of the blessing, Jacob receives a new name, 'Israel'.

This is important, because in Hebrew theology the power to name someone gives the one who names 'dominion', authority, over the one named. Adam receives authority to name the other animals who inhabit Garden, and, so the Book of Genesis tells us, has dominion over them; but Elizabeth and Zachariah may not name their only child, John the Baptist, when he is born: the Angel Gabriel tells them that his name will be John. God gives the

name and so John will be responsible only to God. And similarly, when the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary, he tells her what she and Joseph will name her son, Jesus. They also will have no authority over the child they raise, only God will have it.

And so, in the lonely place that Jacob calls 'Peniel' (meaning 'face to face'), Jacob loses the name given him by Isaac and Rebecca and receives a new name from God, signifying his importance in the way in which God will move in this world. Jacob is a *gonif*, a scoundrel, and we heard about this last week: he is an exaggerated version of a lot of us at our very worst. And this week we learn that he is also determined and stubborn, that God needs to end the wrestling match with Jacob a bit unfairly, and that even when crippled and in excruciating pain Jacob holds on to God until he receives the blessing he demands. What seems to be part of the reason for Jacob's significance to God is his stubborn determination to hang on ... tight, to persevere.

You see, Jacob's perseverance is equally matched by, is an emblem of, God's own determination to bless and heal and reconcile a Creation, a world, that keeps wandering away from the Law that God gave and that Jesus summarizes: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself --there is no commandment greater than these. God is as ferociously tenacious as Jacob, and God will not let go of any of us any more than Jacob will let go of God until there is blessing given and received. God uses the example of Jacob's tenacity to give us an image of how the Divine works in this world and also of how we who struggle even as we pray 'thy will be done' might be part of that happening. We may need to persevere as stubbornly as Jacob, to hang on as tightly to God's love and purposes, in order to help to make those love and purposes known.

Consider the reading from Matthew's Gospel that we have just heard, the story the feeding of the five thousand. It is a story of immense significance among those who call themselves disciples of Jesus, for it is the only miracle story that all four of the Gospels record. We each know the outline of the story well, and yet the details, certainly in Matthew's telling, are significant.

Again, Jesus has made a poor impression on his old friends and neighbors in Nazareth, and they resist his teaching; then he hears that the prophet sent to prepare the way for him, preaching a gospel of repentance and forgiveness, has been slaughtered. He tries to go somewhere quiet in order to mourn, to grieve. He takes a boat and his most intimate followers go with him, but the crowd, the mob, he has begun routinely to attract simply follow along on the shore. Unbidden and unwelcome, they also attract still more to their number as they go, and by the time Jesus lands they are able to fill up the deserted place he has sought in order to pray, in order to be with the Father. And there, as in the lonely place where Jacob meets his wrestling match, everyone encounters the Divine.

Jesus begins to heal and to teach because that is what he does, and as evening gathers his intimate followers worry that the mob is now hungry and could become surly. They ask him to dismiss everyone. Jesus tells them that there is no need to worry, that they should just give the crowd some food: The Twelve themselves are to feed the rest, and all they can do is protest. They have five loaves of bread and two fish, they say, and that is nowhere near enough to share, and they give up on being able to do anything to help.

So Jesus tells them to bring the bread and the fish to him, he tells everyone to be seated and he openly prays and blesses what is available. He then tells The Twelve to begin to distribute what is there, and it turns out that there is enough for everyone and more than enough. And Jesus makes a number of points: first off, You pray: you pray that your eyes open to see that with God there is somehow always enough and ... you begin to share, you begin to distribute. You do not just give up: you begin to do what you can

And because on this Sunday we hear this story just after the story of Jacob's wrestling with God, we have the encouragement to consider what Jacob might have done were he among The Twelve. Tenacity, stubborn determination --the qualities which won Jacob the blessing even though he lost the wrestling match-- were not much in evidence among Jesus' intimates, although after prayer and blessing they were able to do more than they thought possible. And so the invitation that we perhaps have today is to remember that the God who so thoroughly and determinedly loves the Creation and its Creatures asks us to love and bless with similar tenacity, both our Creator and our neighbors. Amen.