

Wrestling with A Generous God?

Genesis 32: 22-31; Matt 14: 13-21

Jacob is quite the character. He is not the unblemished Joseph, or the innocent and loyal Daniel. Jacob is multi-layered. He comes from important people; yet, his life starts off kind of rocky. Right from birth, no one is really sure what to make of him. He is born holding on to the heel of his twin brother, Esau, who was born a millisecond before him. He grows up trying to find his place in the world: trying to find a way to be seen and lifted up his father. He makes less than honorable decisions in order to please his mother; he goes on the run. God forgives him anyway.

Jacob is one of those characters that helps us find a footing in the Bible. If he was always respectable, completely honest and never made a mistake, he would make a great role model, but he wouldn't be intelligible to us mortals. Jacob helps us find a way into the stories and into the calling of scripture. He is messy and broken, like the rest of us.

As we think about the story of Jacob's life, we might recall he has two defining and redeeming interactions with God. The first, we heard about a couple of weeks ago when we heard the story of his encounter with God in a dream while sleeping with his head on a rock for a pillow. Jacob names the place Bethel, or "house of God". This week, we hear the story of Jacob wrestling with God at a place he comes to name Peniel, "face of God".

God continues to draw near to Jacob, the imperfect human being called to do God's work. Jacob seems to choose another road at every opportunity. God pursues Jacob. Jacob and God wrestle with one another, and Jacob is renamed Israel, meaning "strives with God". Jacob cannot escape the presence and calling of God. Even when God appears unable to defeat Jacob in battle, Jacob's life belongs to God. Jacob does not leave unscathed. He is struck on the hip, and a lasting impression is made.

In the dead of night, Jacob encounters God. Jacob has stolen from his brother and, on his return journey to ask for his brother's forgiveness and to try to make amends with his brother, Jacob is once again visited in the night with much discomfort and wrestling. You see, this interaction with God, in which Jacob wrestles with him through the whole night, happens after he returns to his homeland and is preparing to meet with Esau. It sounds a lot like God came to Jacob as his own conscience. Something was stirring in Jacob that would not let go of him. His insides were all twisted as he tried to gain the courage to do what he knows he must do.

Just before our passage this morning, the writers of Genesis tell us that, as Jacob and his whole clan travelled back to their homeland, Jacob sends messengers ahead of him to announce his arrival and to ask for permission to return. His messengers tell him they met with Esau, and Esau was traveling to meet him in the company of 400 men. Upon hearing this, Jacob is "greatly afraid and distressed". (Genesis 32:7) In an act of *fear*, he divides his household in two sending each party in a different direction. He scatters the people and the livestock traveling with him with the thought that if one of them is attacked and destroyed, the other might survive. Jacob then cries out to God asking God for deliverance.

Such a human story. Reconciliation is desired, but there is so much fear inside the party seeking forgiveness that energy and resources are wasted. Jacob's fear most surely infected his

family and his household. His fear of retribution sent them running for their lives: probably spreading more fear and more misunderstanding as they went.

Esau, the injured party in this reconciliation, does not seek vengeance. In fact, that was never Esau's intention. Esau comes out to embrace his brother; he is happy to see him again. Esau is overjoyed to have the family together again. When Esau hugs and kisses Jacob, the two men weep.

Seeking and receiving forgiveness has a way of doing this to both the offender and the injured. Forgiveness and reconciliation break people open. It liberates them from years of anger, conflict and wasted energy. It makes room for joy and beloved community.

With all the good that could come from forgiveness and reconciliation, it is a wonder why the Jacobs of the world struggle with their conscience, why they struggle with their God. It is a wonder why we so often wrestle with God's call in our lives. When we think of God as a generous God, as a God who is forgiving, continually offering grace to the broken and feeding those who left behind everything to follow Jesus, why do we still wrestle with God?

The Church, in all its forms and iterations, upholds the notion that the ways of this world are broken. Whatever we believe happened, or didn't happen in the Garden of Eden, there is one Truth that has stood the test of time. Humanity is not perfect. When we know something to be good and just, we still have trouble choosing it. There are stumbling blocks in front of us which make the road long and hard.

Jesus came to show us a way forward. In our gospel reading this morning, we hear the story of Jesus feeding the multitude. This is an interesting and challenging time for Jesus. In the verses just before our Matthew reading, Jesus learns that John the Baptist has been executed by King Herod. He has been decapitated and his head served on a platter to the king's daughter. John has become another victim of violence and human degradation. He is another man whose beloved-ness has been denied by those in power.

Jesus is grief stricken. He slips away in order to take some time for himself and his feelings. But, the people hear where he has gone, and they follow him. Their need is just too great; they seek him out. Jesus took a boat out to a deserted place to be alone, so as he returns to shore, he notices a crowd has gathered.

Upon seeing the people, Jesus is moved to compassion and heals the sick among them. Our reading says, "he had compassion for them". (Matthew 14:14) In English compassion is a noun. It is a feeling we have. In the Greek it is a verb meaning "to be moved as to one's bowels". It is something that grips you. It takes hold of you and does not easily let go of you. This is the kind of compassion that literally moves you.

Jesus is moved at the mere sight of people in need of help and healing. He sees those beaten down by poverty, hunger and the injustices of autocratic rule, and is instantly moved in his gut. Jesus, our guide and our deliverer, does not wrestle with the feeling. He goes with it. He follows where it leads. He lets the feeling grip him and move him to action.

Now, let's go back for a second. Jesus had gone off to try and practice some self-care. He was hoping to spend some time away from the cares of the world in order to grieve the loss of a man who was so many things to him. John the Baptist was his cousin. He was Jesus' colleague in ministry to their people. John baptized Jesus. In many ways, John was Jesus' mentor. John went

out in front, paving the way for Jesus to continue ministering to the community. Jesus wanted to use some socially distanced time to focus on himself and his loved ones.

But, the world could not wait. His people continued to fall ill and experience hunger. They continued to be violently suppressed by those with the power to make their lives better. Seeing them stirred compassion deep within Jesus, and he took bold action. He immediately heals the sick. The healing goes on until the day draws to a close. When that happens, Jesus finds a way to feed thousands of people with very little.

This could have been a miracle of a magical replenishing basket. I like to think this is the miracle of multiplying goodness. As I often see when I attend church potlucks, it happens all the time. Someone brings a little something. Someone brings a little something else. Another person sees how meaningful just a little sharing can be and contributes something else. In the end, there is suddenly more food than seemed possible at the start.

Jesus shows with his very being and his very actions what compassion looks like. It is *love in action*. It is like the Wall of Moms in Portland who saw the violence enacted on their city at the hands of individuals seeking to decrease access to fundamental Constitutional rights and came out to protect those first amendment rights. They put their bodies and their lives on the line to stop needless violence: self-sacrificing love in action.

Self-sacrificing love in action is the way of Jesus. When Jesus heals and feeds the thousands of men, women and children who have come to him, he did so at great risk. Thousands of people in a desert terrain of hills and valleys are not easily missed. The authorities will know what is happening here. The people who just murdered John for offering hope and healing to the people will know Jesus is continuing his ministry without their approval. Although it is not unlawful to gather, the authorities will issue condemnation and threats for not being patriotic and following the customs, norms and traditions of those in power.

Jesus heals anyway. Jesus feeds anyway. Jesus gathers with the powerless and the despised anyway. Jesus puts his body and his life on the line because he let the compassion stirring inside him move him to action. Self-sacrificing love in action unsettles the powerful. It upends the ways of this world: the binary of have and have-nots, conservative and liberal, citizen and foreigner. And, that's what we know about Jesus. Jesus came to do away with the ways of this world in order to bring the ways of the kin(g)dom of heaven into our existence.

Self-sacrificing love in action is the way of Jesus. Following the call of the stirrings deep in our guts is the way of Jesus. May the ways of Jesus infect us all and bring a new reality to our nation and to our world.