

Sermon for August 6, 2017 (Proper 13A): "Grappling With Grace"

(based on Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21)

Jesus was a wrestler. You might not have known it to look at him. There is no WWF trading card with his name on it, but Jesus was a wrestler. And, like Jacob on the riverbank, Jesus had his hands full. He had just had his world rocked by news of the very public and cruel and senseless death of his cousin, John. It hits him like a right hook, a headlock, a body slam. And he heads out to the lake to deal with his grief, but the people follow him. It's like hosting summer guests when your dad has dementia and your sister's going through chemo and the best dog you ever had just died...

"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."

"*You* give them something to eat." What is Jesus asking of the disciples? Is he overwhelmed, and simply buying himself some time, asking his friends to take up the slack...or is Jesus saying something about the way God works in the world?

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.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain, the supervisor of our chaplain group called us in for a training exercise. She explained that most of us grow up in the United States learning to be good individuals, to climb the ladder, to distinguish ourselves from everyone else. “That might be good for business,” she said, “but it's not how you build community.” From then on, we had to begin our meetings with a sort of “check-in” designed not to show off our differences, but to open us up to connection. We were to start with a simple statement of emotion, followed by the words, “anyone else?” “I'm excited to be here. Anyone else?” “I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed today, anyone else?” “I'm just really sad about the news today, and it's hard for me to focus on other things. Anyone else?” There was no judgement, no jockeying for position, no crowing at our own accomplishments, just an invitation to each other to name our shared emotional space. And it was terribly uncomfortable at first, halting and awkward. But then we began to learn the startling truth, that in each of our feelings, even the shame, the grief, the irritation and frustration and distress, we turned out to not be alone.

As we opened up to each other and invited connection, we tapped into something much deeper than these shared surface feelings. As we shared our struggles, our hopes, our fears, our honest experience, a well of kindness—even tenderness—sprang up in our midst and refreshed our souls. It wasn't our growing professional skill that did the trick. It wasn't our confidence or our cleverness. It was the offering of our honest experience. It was the way we listened as one chaplain poured out her grief over an infant that had died. It was the way we prayed together when another chaplain told us his father was dying of cancer. It was the way we celebrated a chaplain's story of a bedside conversation where everyone felt the presence of grace and peace.

I imagine the disciples sitting there, tired and worried, anxious and stressed, like that small group of chaplains at the hospital. Each one, lost in the maze of his or her thoughts, feels overwhelmed by problems, by the hugeness of the hunger around them.

How will they decide who deserves their limited resources? How will they judge which ones are worthy? Then, one of them speaks up: “I have a loaf of bread. Anyone else?” Another disciple says, “Me too.” Another makes the connection and says, “I have a fish.” And that's where the blessing begins. That's where the angel meets us. That's where God shows up in the dust and the sweat and we find our true names. That's where the feast of abundance and the joy of reconciliation are revealed. That's where the sun comes up, and the loaves and fishes multiply and the people are fed.

That is the Good News, for all us hungry crowds, for all us heel-grabbers and wrestlers of God. Let the people say: Amen.

--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison
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(Bonus material: below, you'll find a playful retelling of Genesis 32:22-31)

Jacob was a heel-grabber, from the day that he was born.
Brother Esau came out first, but Jacob looked at him with scorn.
Esau earned respect for hunting. He'd do well by aiming surely.
But Jacob was a sneaky stealer. Jacob started sponging early.
Esau wished to send his brother far away, to the Hindu Kush.
But Jacob kept on grabbing heels. Jacob was a serious mooch.
The way he lied and stole was shocking. Mom & Dad found it distressing.
He'd steal your shoes while you were dressing. He'd trade porridge for a blessing!
When he had stolen everything from friends and family that he could,
He wheeled and dealed in other places. Jerky Jacob was no good.
Things turn around, when God is found. That's the truth—at least we hope.
Jacob's life came back to haunt him. He had reached the end of his rope.
No more time to plot and plan, no more time to whine and pout.
He found himself at the ford of Jabbok, where the river emptied out.
He'd meet his brother the next morning. Esau swore he'd smite him dead.
Jacob watched the sun go down with heavy heart and aching head.
And then, in darkness, came a stranger. Jacob heard the stranger's voice
He reached out, with arms wide open. Jacob made a wild choice.
“I don't know you, but I'll hold you, I won't run. I'll still hold on.”
So the angel wrestled Jacob—wrestled him from dusk to dawn.
Tired to the bone, they wrestled. Angel said, “now let me go.”
“Yes, but give me first a blessing” The angel smacked his hip, just so,
And that's how Jacob started limping. That's the holy gift he got.
Now he'd need the help of others. In the circle, he was caught.
No more grabbing just to take things. Now he'd need a steadying hand.
And that's the only way we'll make it into any promised land.

--HSM 8/6/17

