

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's from home
GENESIS 32:22-31; PSALM 17:1-7, 16; ROMANS 9:1-5; MATTHEW
14:13-21

And there he blessed him.

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You give them something to eat.

I'm going to start—but speak briefly (if I can)—about the reading from Genesis. Just to point out a couple of things.

This story of Jacob's wrestling match at Peniel has entered deep into our imagination. It's a compelling story, and it's compelling for a couple of reasons. Partly because it's a story about wrestling with God in some way, and how in wrestling with God we can come away wounded, but also with a new start—a hip out of joint, perhaps, but also with a new name and a fresh destiny.

But the story becomes that much more compelling, and even strange, as we look more closely. Jacob begins by wrestling not God but a man, and a man that is something of an aggressor—at least that's how Hosea would interpret this passage, in one of those wonderful moments when Scripture interprets Scripture.

For the prophet Hosea, this aggressive force is emblematic of Israel's struggle against *God's* future, where God is first an enemy and only then a friend, and where God uses a kind of force *against* us, in order to chasten, to make holy, even, and to set our eyes on God's own destiny for us.

Because in the end, as Jacob strives against this oppressive force, holding him down, with neither letting go of the other—at the end of the story, it appears that it *is* actually God with whom Jacob is wrestling. The story presses this point home, when Jacob is *blessed*: “you have striven with God and with humans.”

This is hard to see, sometimes, as we wrestle with one another, with others who appear to oppress us, people with whom we might feel we are locked in an unending wrestling match in some long and interminable night, with no one relenting.

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And it may seem like we are wrestling simply with the forces of oppression. And let's be clear, sometimes that may well be true. But sometimes, and perhaps more often than we'd like to admit, this wrestling with others is to wrestle with God in disguise, and a God who preparing us in that struggle for the *blessing* of God's future for us.

And that's the last thing I'd say today about Jacob's long wrestling match. Sure, Jacob prevails. But the resolution of this story is not in winning or losing. The resolution of this story is *blessing*.

And so if you find yourself in an interminable wrestling match with others, and even when it feels as though you're struggling with oppressive forces set to pin you down, I would ask you, not about what it might take to win or lose (that's a fool's game), but what does *blessing* look like in your situation?

What would it look like to be *blessed* by your opponent?

Or even, what might it look like if *you* were to bless the one with whom you struggle?

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I'm going to turn now to the Gospel—and those wonderfully acerbic words of Jesus, spoken to his disciples: “*You* give them something to eat.”

The words, at first, seem a bit harsh, right? A “great crowd” had followed Jesus around a lake. And despite his own plans for the day—his planned solitude most certainly did not include throngs of people—Jesus “had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

And he did that *all* day.

And by the end of the day the crowds were hungry, and so (in perhaps a bit of false helpfulness), the disciples suggest to Jesus that he “send the

crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But it’s a bit of an exercise in passing the buck. “Sure the people are hungry. But what do you want me to do about it? They can all take care of themselves, right? Send them away, Jesus.”

And I love Jesus’s answer here. At first glance, it’s acerbic, perhaps even slightly bitter. “What are you looking at me for? I just *healed* people all day.” “*You* give them something to eat.” “Like what, you want me to do everything? You think *you’re* gonna pass the buck to *me*? Nice try. I’m gonna pass the buck right back to you. *You* give them something to eat.”

Now we should suspect that Jesus could have taken care of the problem on his own. Our God is one that is able to create from nothing, and did so at the beginning of creation; and Jesus could most certainly have called on that power that day.

If that’s a bit too philosophical and abstract—we don’t need to look further than the wilderness wandering of Israel. In that wilderness, God has manna fall from the sky, and quail appear in enough quantity that everyone was satisfied. And so we can imagine that Jesus could just as well have said, “Father, you fed your people in the wilderness. Could you, uh, do that again?”

But he doesn’t. Instead, he turns to the disciples and says: “*You* give them something to eat.”

But there’s more going on here than the sorts of arguments we might get into at home: “you empty the dishwasher.” “No you empty the dishwasher.” “But I cooked supper.” “Yeah but I took out the garbage!” (Now I don’t imagine that sounds familiar at all, because it’s domestic bliss all ‘round, right?)

No, there’s more going on here than an argument about the chores. And we see that if we read ahead. Jesus might have said “you give them something to eat,” but what happens is that Jesus still makes it all happen

in the multiplication of the bread and the fish. A little bit of food comes from the crowd. The disciples distribute the food. And the food miraculously multiplies.

And so what's happening when Jesus says "you give them something to eat," is that Jesus is inviting the disciples into his ministry. What happens here is a kind of divine decision *for* us—that even though Jesus arguably could have taken care of it all, *without* the disciples, Jesus judges it better that the disciples would be invited in, and to take part in his ministry.

And so what looks at first like a bit of a domestic kerfuffle about just who exactly was supposed to make the dinner, becomes a sign of what God's ministry looks like. We don't serve others because Jesus can't do it. Neither does God serve others all by himself, or in cooperation with Jesus only, even though in a way, it would be easier for God to do just that (disciples being the complainers that sometimes we are).

No, it is by the grace of God, and for our own sake, that we are invited into God's own work. And it's a ministry that we are invited into by making our own small offering—perhaps a bit of bread, or a bit of fish (gifts already given to us), and God in Christ turns that into *far* more than enough.

One of the reasons I bring this up is because I think many of us—or maybe I should speak for myself—feel a bit tired from all the adaptation we've been doing in church community life, and are feeling that the fall looks very daunting. What we need to do to begin to open up in-person worship is a big task.

Just about every aspect of our life together will be *different* from what we remembered it to be. And I know there's part of me that would rather it was all figured out by someone else, thank you Jesus. And perhaps, as we begin to divide the tasks, others of us will be tempted to do the same: "who me? No, you ...or at least someone else."

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But our lesson from Matthew today tells us that to be invited into ministry is a *gift given to us*. And not only our ministries in the church—but our ministries to our children at home, our ministries to elderly family members, and our ministries to strangers and friends. To be invited into the care of others is part of our sanctification, part of God's way of making us holy, part of God's way of inviting us into his life—a life of *care*.

May we be blessed not only to see the potential for blessing in our seemingly endless struggles with others. May we also be blessed with eyes to see that our ministry begins with gifts already given, and to give away again what we've been given, and that this is not only a grace given to others, but a grace given to the givers, the grace of taking part in God's own ministry.

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