

Sermon – The Dance of Life

Scripture Readings – Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14: 13-21

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Our first Scripture reading is Genesis 32:22-31: Jacob wrestles at Peniel. Today, we continue the story of Jacob, Abraham's grandson, who left his home 21 years earlier in fear of his brother's revenge after tricking Esau and their father Isaac into giving him the birthright and the blessing that culture mandated to the oldest son. Last week we recalled Jacob's victimization of another's trickery. His uncle Laban insists his older daughter Leah be given in marriage to Jacob before his younger daughter Rachel. Jacob worked 7 years for each wife and an additional 7 years before returning to his homeland with his family. The night before Jacob reunites with his brother Esau, Jacob is frightened and anxious. He has sent generous gifts ahead hoping to appease Esau. Once again, Jacob finds himself alone in the night. Hear now the Word of God.

*22 The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man<sup>[a]</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." 29 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel,<sup>[d]</sup> saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Amen.*

Our second reading is Matthew 14:13-21: The Feeding of the Five Thousand. Before this familiar and important miracle takes place, we are given some insight in Jesus' personal life. He has just received word that John the Baptist has been beheaded. An act Herod was tricked into ordering at his birthday party following the dance of his stepdaughter. Jesus withdraws out of the region of Herod's reign for safety, alone as he struggles with his own grief and loss. We are not privy to the words Jesus shared with his Father in his solitude but we know he came forth strengthened with energy to offer compassion, to heal the sick, and to feed the hungry. Because the words Jesus spoke in the feeding of the five thousand are reminiscent of the words he spoke at the Last Supper, this gathering is understood as a foreshadowing of the Sacrament of Communion. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

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

The title of the sermon: The Dance of Life

*The text: Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. Genesis 32:24*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, Lord of the Dance, we thank you for meeting us in those deepest struggles which define who we are. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The beloved Shaker melody “Simple Gifts” was composed in 1848 by Joseph Brackett. Written within a tradition which honored simplicity and practiced strict personal discipline and self-control, Shaker manuscripts indicate that this melody was a dancing song.

The well-known version of Simple Gifts is “Lord of the Dance” by English songwriter Sydney Carter, who adapted the Shaker tune in 1963. He chose the metaphor of dance to describe events in God’s entering into our human struggle in the life of Christ. The refrain both comforts and affirms:

*Dance then wherever you may be.  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he.  
And I’ll lead you on wherever you may be.  
And I’ll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

As with all religions of antiquity, dance had its place in Israelite life and worship. The preacher in Ecclesiastics 3 affirms *there is a time to mourn and a time to dance*. Dance in ancient worship was most often an expression of joy and an act of praise---harmonious and rhythmic movement of the body in sheer exuberance of spirit. There is little reference to dancing in the Bible, however the references we find indicate dancing was a part of the ebb and flow, the cadence of their life...and as frequent as mourning.

Those ‘times to dance’ specifically mentioned include Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea and Yahweh’s annual feast of Shiloh. There is also some indication of the Passover celebration including a limping dance, and, of course, who could forget David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant in his skivvies.

There is a freedom in this important expression of ourselves that is very basic and at the core of our human experience. In fact, my husband Peter who is a pediatrician likes to point out that toddlers learn to dance before they learn to speak. What a delightful sight it is to watch the expression of utter joy in the toddler who dances and laughs with total abandonment.

Perhaps because dancing is so close to the core of human expression and sexuality, dancing has also been feared and in some cases, forbidden by religious groups. Yet, what a wonderful metaphor for life this is---the expression of joy, yes, but also of sorrow, of our triumphs and our struggles, the give and the take in the dance of life wherever we may be.

In Genesis 32, Jacob finds himself at a crucial point in the dance of his life. The narrative of Jacob’s wrestling with the mysterious man at the Jabbok is one of the Bible’s classic stories of struggle. At one level this is the story of the human struggle with God, but at another level it is a story of a human struggling with ineself. What emerges from the story...is the reality that, even in the midst of our struggles with God and with self, the most enduring word is a word of God’s grace. In the end the man blesses Jacob and bestows on him a new name.

This struggle takes place at an important transition in Jacob's life. In many ways he needed to come face to face with his God and with himself before he could come face to face with his brother. This metaphorical dance is a necessary exercise in Jacob's becoming and prepares him for the challenge ahead.

God takes on human form (a foreshadowing of the Incarnate) and genuinely enters into a struggle with Jacob. We find no hint that God could have overwhelmed Jacob as any moment. Rather, God risks vulnerability. God does retain certain kinds of power in the struggle, however. God is able to do with Jacob's name what Jacob is not able to do with God's name. In fact, God does not tell Jacob what God's name is. This highlights an important boundary between God and humanity that needs to be honored and respected. Part of the grace in Jacob's struggle with God is a new understanding of himself and his humanity. Jacob leaves this encounter with a deeper reverence for God, the One who gives the blessing. For all of Jacob's strength, perseverance, and prevailing he recognizes the need for a blessing which can finally only be received from God.

And so what Jacob learns in the struggle of Jabbok at Peniel where he saw the face of God is that God knows who he is and accepts him anyway. The miracle of this encounter is the good news of the gospel, that God engages us where we are and having named us, preserves us in order to transform our lives.

Jacob walks away, prepared to come face to face with his brother, not only with a new name but also with a new limp. He was wounded by his wrestling with God. He penetrated the mystery of God like none before him and the limp is a reminder that there is a cost in drawing too near and claiming too much. A cost we risk when we make ourselves vulnerable with God and one another.

According to theologian Walter Brueggemann, *"This narrative reflects some of Israel's most sophisticated theology. On the one hand, Jacob soars to bold heights almost as a Greek god. But then, he is corrected by a limp affirming that only God is God. On the other hand, Jacob is a cripple with a blessing. Israel must ponder how it is that blessings are given and at what cost. The same theology of weakness in power and power in weakness turns this text toward the New Testament and the gospel of the cross."*

In the gospel of the cross we encounter the paradox of a God who is strong enough to enter into our weakness, and who teaches us that our weaknesses can become a source of strength. This is the challenge with which we struggle and dance. Like Jacob and the disciples, we are invited to be persons of faith who prevail, yet who also limp.

Certainly in the days following Jesus' death on the cross, his disciples pondered the day they shared with him on the hillside when he fed the five thousand in the midst of his own personal grief and loss. Perhaps, they wondered; perhaps Jesus knew even then when "he took the loaves and blessed and broke the bread and gave it to them" that this simple gesture of hospitality would come to symbolize the ultimate struggle he would endure, naming and blessing each of us in the dance of life.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord of the dance...* Thanks be to God. Amen.