

"Hungry for Grace"

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT – August 6, 202

PLEASE READ:

Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14:13-21

One of my favorite summaries of the gospel is this: "Cheer up, your situation is far worse than you could have ever imagined. But cheer up! God's love for you is far greater than you could have ever hoped!" It's a tongue-in-cheek way of acknowledging the often very difficult and complex predicaments in which we find ourselves, but also affirms the ultimate source of our hope in the One who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Maybe this is a good week to remember these two truths that we hold in tension? It's been a week of political turbulence that we haven't seen in a very long time, and so it's good, perhaps, to step back and reaffirm that our faith is centered in the grace of God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that God loves us and, no matter what, we can trust that God is for us and seeks ultimately to bless us.

This theme is embedded, I believe, in both of our lectionary texts for today. Our Old Testament lesson jumps into the story of Jacob. You'll remember that Jacob was born holding onto his brother Esau's ankle. That's pretty much how he spent the rest of his life, gripping and grabbing, conniving and conning others to get what he wanted. Like many of us, he longed for something more out of life. He was not content with who he was or what he had, and so he was always scheming and scamming for something more. He swindled his brother out of his birthright with a bowl of stew. He fooled his father into giving him Esau's blessing. And because of Jacob's deceit, Esau wanted to kill him. So, Jacob ran. He ran for about twenty years. Jacob did alright for himself, but life has a way of catching up to you. Jacob is now heading home, and Esau is planning to meet him with 400 other men. Jacob knows that you don't need four-hundred men to have a nice family reunion! He's afraid.

It's night; and Jacob is on the boundary between home and nowhere. On the wilderness bank of the Jabbok, Jacob is alone... That's usually when it happens, isn't it? When you're feeling like you're alone? Afraid and in the dark about 3 A.M. How many times, in the dark desert lonely places of life, has the night seemed like it would never end, and we toss and turn in our beds, afraid of what tomorrow might bring? With a major decision, or in illness and uncertainty, about a job or family member or about work, or in the midst of aching grief, the night can seem so very, very long. Finally, in the silence and in the aloneness, Jacob comes face to face with his fears and face to face with God. And he realizes that what he longs for is something he

can't get for himself. He tells the one with whom he wrestles, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Then a moment of truth comes: The man asks, "What is your name?" This should be a simple question, except in the past Jacob has lied about his name in order to get ahead. This time, when the man asks, "what's your name?" though, he answers, "Jacob." That's me. That's who I am. When I face myself and when I face my God, I know the truth about myself – that I am mixed up, confused, conniving and yet hungering, thirsting for something more.

In the honesty of confession, there comes the freedom for new identity. Jacob is given the name "Israel" which means "one who struggles with God." In the new name, given by the stranger, there is new being. Power has shifted in God's relation to the world. A new man, a new people has been formed, called forth. Israel is the one who has faced God, been gripped by God, prevailed, gained a blessing, and been renamed. And it becomes our story, because truth be told, we all struggle with God and who God is for us...

I believe this is a story of grace - but not grace as it is usually defined. It's not a sweet version of amazing grace. This is a tough, assaulting amazing grace. Jacob had to grip hold of the man and hang on for dear life and hang on for new life. When daylight comes, the man is gone. So is Jacob. Now only Israel remains, and he's walking with a limp. Sometimes struggling with God in the night both blesses and wounds.

Jesus knew this also, and well we should acknowledge it if we would dare to follow him. The Gospel text is an account of Jesus' gracious (and miraculous) healing and provision of food for the multitude. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus included in all four gospels. That tells us that we should pay attention to the significance of this story. What is it all about and what does it mean for us today?

Perhaps an obvious point to be remembered: God can bless us without a struggle and without wounding us! God has resources that we cannot imagine, and is completely willing to bless without us having to grovel, or wait until we've exhausted all of our own striving and struggling in life...

It's interesting to note that the scene of the feeding of the five thousand is also in a deserted place where Jesus went to be alone. The news headlines of Jesus' day were also filled with shocking political turmoil. He'd just learned about the brutal

execution of his friend John the Baptist. Perhaps Jesus was wrestling with grief and the reminder of what lay ahead. But even there, the people find him. Jesus heals the sick, and at the end of the day, everybody's hungry for food. It's interesting that like Jacob, the disciples wanted the people to have to fend for themselves, to go and find their own food. But there, even in the wilderness, Jesus was willing and able to feed the multitude out of the abundance of his resources. With compassion, he blessed, and fed them with no requirement. It was a pure gift. They didn't have to fight for his blessing. They didn't have to struggle. There was enough for everyone.

You see, the good news makes the bold affirmation that Jesus wrestled on our behalf. He went to the mat for us. It was Jesus who struggled in the night in order to secure a blessing for us all. No one was there when Jesus had it out with the powers and principalities that sought to undermine God's love and justice. Jesus wrestled with the full weight of evil when he prayed and sweated drops of blood, when he wretched in agony alone on the cross.

Remember, God's love for us is greater than we could ever hope. But perhaps we can't fathom how amazing God's grace really is until God wrestles from us our own self-centered striving and achieving? It's not that we will not have more struggles in life with what it means to *follow* Jesus, but we will be different people as we are *fed and strengthened* by Jesus.

Notice that Israel still has to go out and meet his brother. It is after his encounter with God that he - a new man - can face his worst fears. And so also, only when we face the truth of our lives and stand beneath the cross of Christ can we endure the painful work of repentance, of change, of transformation and living into our identity as the children of God, heirs of the kingdom, disciples and ambassadors of Christ, ministers of reconciliation.

You see, Jesus is not one who simply puts food in your mouth every time you're hungry or heals you every time you're sick. Sometimes through painful circumstances, emptiness, loneliness, even loss God invites you to be changed. Sometimes God may even pursue and pin you to the ground to help you realize your need for change. God loves you enough to turn you around to discover the blessing of new life... not an easy life, but a life of new meaning and purpose. This too, is grace.

There was another Jacob in the history of God's people named John Newton. At the age of eleven, Newton went to sea. Eventually he rose to captain a ship in the slave trade. It was a cruel and vicious way of life that Newton led. One night at sea with

a storm howling around him, Newton was reading the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis. Reflecting on this book and his own miserable life, Newton eventually realized how wrong the slave trade was. He gave his life to Christ and became an effective crusader against slavery. Eventually he was ordained within the Anglican Church, and wrote hymns, one of which might be called the most enduring hymn of all, *Amazing Grace*. Notice, the words of the second line, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved..."

Apparently, Newton also experienced that hunger for God's grace... The story of Jacob's wrestling match with the stranger and Newton's experience would indicate that our God is big, illusive, and real. God is not always a gentle old papa/mama filled with light, but sometimes an assaulting adversary in the night. Newton wrote his own inscription for his tombstone: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." My favorite quote of Newton is simply, "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior!"

Are there any sisters or brothers of Jacob or John Newton here today? As we gather around this table, I would encourage you to consider how you have struggled in the darkness with fears and anxieties, even how you may still be wrestling with God, and perhaps have been wounded in that struggle... Remember that God's ultimate desire is to fill you, to bless and give you a future with hope. There is One who struggled for you; and who holds onto you in order to give you a blessing. By his wounds we are healed. And the promise is that even though we may walk with a limp, in Christ we will walk into the light of a new dawn, a new life, because of God's sometimes assaulting - but always amazing grace...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.