

This is the Sunday for those who are Called to not be Humble Submissive Sainly. We could call this "Demanding Believer Sunday!" Both our readings provide a refreshing correction to the mistaken idea that faith is the same as Passive Acceptance. Ours is not a Nation, where you are born into being Catholic, Buddhist or Muslim. Our Protestant Faith is instead a Stubborn Refusal to let GOD off the hook, to demand that GOD be GOD, so that we can be real with ourselves, with one another and with GOD.

As founder of the Nation of Israel, Jacob (here renamed Israel) was The Most Important Patriarch of the Jewish Nation. Outside of Genesis, The Bible names Jacob more often than ADAM, NOAH and ABRAHAM combined. Jacob is the Israelites' most important ancestor. I had a close friend who had been Jewish, who struggled when I would name Jacob a schemer and scoundrel, a cheat, because Jacob is the George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln for the Nation of Israel. Jacob, who after outwitting his brother and deceiving their father; encountered his mother Rebekah's brother Laban, challenging Laban for how much Jacob would be paid, whether he could marry the daughter he desires, whether he can use Laban's property to create a great fortune and to whom that treasure then belongs, and whether he and his family can leave when they choose. All these arguments leave Jacob estranged from Laban; now Returning to his father's HOME, he is fearful his brother Esau is still seeking revenge after 20 years.

While the Lectionary chose this passage to go along with the Feeding of the 5000 as stories of "Miraculous Persistence in the face of overwhelming realities," this story of Jacob is also about the power of names: There are names we were given, the names we make for ourselves, the names that limit by defining us, and the new name God gives us. What names have you worn? If you could start over in this community, by what name would you be Called? My parents used up all the ancestral family names on older brothers, so I was told my parents just liked the sound of Craig Jonathan. With a passel of kids I was always designated #3 of 4, until we learned there was another who had been put up for adoption and I became 3 of 5. Working in a factory, I earned the Job Title: "Foreman." In Seminary I worked at a Harlem Hospital as "Chaplain." At 26, I became "Reverend," at 33 I became "Dad," at 50 I became "Reverend Doctor." In South Sudan, I received the name "DENG ACHOL" after a wise Grandfather who brought new ideas. It was not until here at Valley that I was ever called "Pastor," because previously whether by 98-year-olds or 4-year-olds I was just "Craig." But my favorite is those who call me "a close Friend."

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this as a favorite passage because it leaves obscure details for believers to fill in. There is description of Laban and his men pursuing the family, to search for what he knows was stolen but cannot find. Jacob devises intricate plans to protect what he possesses, dividing his fortune: hiding half, sending half of what is left with his wife Leah, and the remaining quarter with Rachel. BUT WHOM DID JACOB WRESTLE IN THE NIGHT? All that the text says is a man, a stranger. So did Laban come back to wring Jacob's neck? Did Esau arrive in the night to kill him? Is this Jacob wrestling with himself and his own demons? Or is he wrestling with GOD, who 20 years before had appeared at the top of a ladder? All are very real possibilities, and Jacob makes the assumption that he is wrestling GOD.

Intriguing that when this man has been wrestling with him in the night, Jacob makes the leap to asking for a BLESSING. I wonder at all the names we have for those fleeing violence, gangs, drugs, economic despair in other countries to come to our borders. We call them Aliens, Immigrants, Wetbacks, Mexicans (when many are Guatemalans, or from Ecuador, Haiti or Honduras). And I wonder if from their struggles, what "BLESSING" they might give us? Or if in any way they might be a BLESSING TO US?

I also find it comical, as I have had three-year-old squirmers whom you wrestled to hold still for Baptism; what would it be to try to offer a blessing to someone while wrestling them to the ground?

Still trying to get an upper-hand, Jacob inquires of the stranger "What is your name?" Always remember that the name of a person is a clue to who that other is. ADAM was "of the Earth", EVE was "the Mother" Abraham was "Chosen by God" Isaac was "Laughter gifted by God" and Jacob who had been the Heel, the Ankle Grabber, the Usurper, is renamed ISRAEL "who wrestles with People and with GOD."

Jesus, in Matthew's account, is wrestling with issues of his own. John the Baptist, his countryman, his cousin, the popular folk hero, the one who had Baptized Jesus and had called Jesus "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," John who had stood up against political leaders he knew were wrong, had been arrested and now executed for what he had said.

It is one matter when our Grandparents or parents die, we expect them to pass before us, but our siblings and cousins, hit closer to our mortality. When death comes, not by the mortality of years or human frailties, but for standing up for truth against corruption, the circumstance becomes more than the loss of one life. I can imagine, that in addition to his own mourning and grief, Jesus was needing to question: "When there are political issues, when there is corruption at the highest level, do we as the Church as the Social conscience stand up and speak out, or knowing that like John we could make powerful people angry, could be arrested or killed, do we remain silent?"

In the "Jesus Eats" class on Thursday, Pastor Diane described how often the Bible names feasts at the home of wealthy people. There is a stumbling block for us as 21st Century North Americans that Biblical times, assumed a CASTE SYSTEM, where there was no Middle Class, no Upper Middle, or Lower Middle. I have been reading a fascinating book from our Church Library called CASTE that describes a shift in the United States throughout the last 40 years to eliminate the Middle Class and create a CASTE SYSTEM! There were masses who survived on bare subsistence. There were fishermen and farmers who lived for having enough to feed their family, this day. And without a stable Food Source, without the systems we take for granted, not only were people hungry, their immune systems were in jeopardy. So Jesus having concern for feeding the 5000+ is a natural extension of curing illnesses and diseases by curing hunger, and having compassion for their needs. All of which, he makes a priority over his own grief.

I am thankful for what Matthew has done in this passage... because just as happens for us, instead of resolving Jesus' personal feelings about grief, mourning and personal exhaustion... Jesus is confronted by crowds of thousands in need, and he has compassion for them.

This passage has often been compared to the gift of Manna in the Wilderness, but I think there is more here. In Psalm 137, the people of Israel describe being taunted by the Babylonians as they marched to deportation: "Sing us the Songs of Zion"... That setting, and this one, are of a people DISSPIRITED, broken. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that people cannot be bothered with higher level questions about the existence of God, when starving to death, so giving this meal allows them to imagine greater issues like their relationship to God.

At some point we need to confront whether we live from a point of scarcity or extravagance. It is easy to accept a place of scarcity, there is only so much to go around, what are five loaves and 2 fish compared to 5000+? To see the possibility of extravagance, we have to set aside how little there is, and use a different operating system. When I was typing this, I made a typo, dropping out the A in Loaves, and wound up with LOVES. The MIRACLE here is not magically feeding 5000+ with 5 Loaves and 2 Fish, but responding to those in need with LOVE, and there is enough.

I treasure the stories of wrestling in the night, because those are the occurrences when we do more than taking each day as it comes, when we wrestle with forgiveness and faith and who we really want to be.