

Sermon: The Blessings We Wrestle With

Year A, Proper 13

[Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7,15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Offered August 6, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

"I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (Genesis 32:26) How many of the things we wrestle with are we willing to wrestle with long enough to find the blessing in them? How many of the things we wrestle with are we willing to wrestle with hard enough that the struggle leaves a permanent mark on the way we walk through the world?

If I paused right here, you guys could make a mental list. We could look at various outcomes and possibilities of wrestling with some of the stuff on the list. If you could find ways of recognizing the places where God's help would make a big difference to how long and how hard you wrestled, you could go harder for longer. But here's the thing. So could Jacob. If I could have popped up like Kermit the Frog, roving reporter who turns up in those fairy tales on Sesame Street, I could have asked Jacob about what was in his mind.

Getting ready for a big meeting with his brother Esau is why Jacob is alone on the shores of the Jabbok that night. Jacob tricked his brother and his father into giving him Esau's birthright. Then Jacob high tailed it out of there, back to Ur to let Esau's rage simmer down. Jacob spent 20 years away, working for his father-in-law Laban, to earn the right to marry Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel. When it's time to come home, Jacob tricks Laban out of sheep and other portable wealth. Everyone who is travelling with Jacob from Ur knows he likes to rig the game in his favor. Everyone who is waiting to meet Jacob upon his return knows he likes to rig the game in his favor. One of the meanings of the word "Jacob" is "trickster." Another is "heel grabber". So it's not like it's a surprise that Esau may not be psyched that Jacob is coming back. And it's not unreasonable that the men who are herding the animals, Jacob's wealth, might abandon him if they feel he's about to cut them loose in some kind of deal.

Just before this scene on the banks of the Jabbok, we've seen Jacob laying out a huge parade of gifts for Esau. He knows Esau has a right to be steamed at him. Jacob also knows that God has told him to head home. Jacob knows that God has blessed him, but that blessing seems to be kind of a mixed bag. There are some good things in it, like Rachel and Joseph, but there seems to be an awful lot of conflict too.

So if I popped up on the shores of the Jabbok and asked Jacob what he was wrestling with, he would probably answer something about getting into right relationship with his brother.

But no one pops up on the shores of the Jabbok, except the creature who wrestles with Jacob. Jacob says he has seen the face of God and lived. (Genesis 32:30). So maybe he wrestled with God. It's something that is powerful enough to damage his hip with a touch. (Genesis 32:35) So maybe it's an angel. It's something powerful enough to bless Jacob, in any event (Genesis 32:29). But what the text says is that a man wrestled with Jacob all night (Genesis 32:24). Jacob wrestles with a being in the darkness, wrestles to a tie, with neither one willing to concede. And neither one strong enough to win outright. But exactly what it is he wrestles with is not clear. It's ambiguous.

Out of that wrestling match comes a new identity. Jacob will be Israel. (Genesis 32:38) He can give up his identity as a heel grabber and a trickster to become one who strove with God and with humans and who prevailed. Before the ambiguous creature showed up on the shores of the Jabbok, Jacob was thinking through all the stratagems, all the maneuvers large and small, he

could make to lessen his brother's justifiable anger against him. But there's no sense that it occurred to him to look for a new identity. No sense that he was thinking about becoming less of a heel grabber and trickster.

And in the text that follows, he's still a trickster and a heel grabber. Some of the time. And he is also the founder of Israel as well. We see Israel born into the world in the midst of struggle and blessing and ambiguity. The past keeps influencing the future. Jacob isn't dead, Jacob is Jacob. And Israel.

The relationship with God is forever changed on the banks of the Jabbok. A human being is strong enough to tangle with God and live. God is willing to be weak enough to let a human wrestle God to a tie. There is pain and suffering and blessing and ambiguity all tied up in this new relationship. And that jumble is part of the identity that we still inherit as descendants of Jacob. When we wrestle with God we will have to absorb some damage. And we will not be the same as we were going in. But we will live. And what we think we will wrestle over will not be what we end up wrestling over.

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus has stepped away from his ministry after hearing of the murder of his mentor and friend, John the Baptist. Jesus has headed to the far side of the lake for a time of reflection. But everyone has figured out where he's going. So they follow him. Moved by compassion, he heals them (Matthew 14:14). The day grows long and the disciples come up to him to ask him to send the crowds away because it's late and there's nowhere around to get food (Matthew 14:15). Jesus tells them to feed them, and somehow five loaves and two fish are enough for 5,000 men plus women and children. And there are baskets left over.

We can look at this story and talk about the compassion and mercy of God's abundance, of how following Jesus makes a million impossible things possible. But thinking of Jacob wrestling with whatever it was, look at the disciples. When they say the crowds need to leave and find food, Jesus says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16). What do the disciples reply? "We have nothing"¹. They're wrestling with the impossibility of the task. Jesus is telling them to wrestle with distributing the little they do have and letting God work through that little.

So when we hear about wrestling until we find the blessing, until our lives are changed and we cannot go back to the way we were, are we ready for the real wrestling match? Are we really ready to wrestle over something we are not even looking at, thinking about? Are we really ready to wrestle with God over what God intends for us, when it is something that is not even on our radar? Are we willing to take on that much pain and suffering? That's what we've signed up for, because we chose to follow Jesus. We follow him not just across the lake with the rest of the mob, but in his footsteps all the way to the Cross.² He knows about blessings and limping, about grief and compassion. About continuing on in the face of ambiguity. About obedience to a God strong enough to wound and loving enough to engage. Especially when we wrestle with the unexpected blessings in our lives.

¹ Dock Hollingsworth, "Proper 13, Homiletical Perspective, Matthew 14:13-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 311.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 274.