

Jacob Wrestles with God

The life of Jacob, recorded in Genesis, is fascinating. He starts out wrestling with his brother Esau while they were still in the womb, and ends up wrestling with God. In that account, we're told that the Man never actually tells Jacob who He is, all He says is, "you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed," (Gen. 32:28). Jacob asks for His name, but He doesn't answer. Instead, Jacob "called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved,'" (verse 30). Israel, in the original Hebrew means "one who wrestles with God," and Peniel means, "the face of God."

Sometimes we wrestle with God – often through our times in the valleys, trying to get Him to give us His reasoning for us being there – He doesn't always answer us in the way we would like! That applies to us today – individually, culturally as Americans, and even collectively as the body of Christ. If we think we've got a monopoly on understanding God and how He works – look out – that's pride! That's arrogance. There are a lot of religious people running around here today, carrying on about "getting right with God," and how holy He is, and sinful we are. God is holy. We are sinful. I'll say this – God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). His unconditional love for us is the motivating thing behind everything He does. We're going to talk more about wrestling with God today, and about His deep love for us, but before we do, I'd like us to look at the Gospel lesson found in Matthew 14:13-21. **Read Matthew 14:13-21.**

Jesus Hears John the Baptist Was Killed

Our passage this morning opens in the middle of the chapter, so looking at verse 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." The thing Jesus has just heard is that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by King Herod Antipas. Just so we have some context here, John the Baptist got into trouble with Herod because he had very vocally criticized him for being a homewrecker. Herod's brother, Phillip, had a wife named Herodias and Herod took a liking to her, convinced her to divorce his brother, and marry him, and John took a public stance on it. So Herod arrested him and had him thrown in prison.

Herod had a birthday party, and his step-daughter niece Salome danced so pleasantly for ol' Herod, that he swore he'd give her whatever she asked for – so she asked her mom, and Herodias got her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Herod begrudgingly gave it to her. So that's the immediate thing that's just happened prior to our passage today. Jesus has just heard about the death of his cousin. They were close – John baptized Jesus – and, some of Jesus' disciples started out as disciples of John.

So what do you suppose Jesus was looking to do, when He got in the boat to go to a deserted place by Himself in verse 13? What would we do, if we just heard that someone we were close to had been killed? We'd be sad. I suspect He's going to grieve. To spend time in prayer. To come to terms with the reality that He's the sole prophetic voice of God left on the earth. But He barely gets a chance to breathe, because He drew a crowd everywhere He went!

He Had Compassion

Look what Jesus does next. "When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion for them and cured their sick," (verse 14). Everything we see Jesus do in the Gospels is motivated by the mercy of God poured out for us. He's the love of God wrapped in human skin. He's concerned about the ordinary, mundane, everyday things which concern us. That's something we should be mindful of, especially in regards towards others. If we see someone with a need, we should be stepping in to help them, whatever their need may be, and in whatever fashion we're able to assist.

"When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves,'" (verse 15). Do you hear what the disciples say to Jesus here? "Send them away." In other words, "they're hungry, but don't expect us to feed them."

Now, I want to tell you something. A month ago a group of us went down to the Alpha Center to serve a meal to people with whom most of us wouldn't publicly associate. That's the sad reality of it. We served them Lee's Chicken – and there was enough of it for them to pack up to take with them. We've been told before by the people down there they always like it when New Hope comes in, because they know they're going to be well fed. Apparently other area churches don't give the same kind of regard to feeding people that we do. Before Covid-19, one of the regulars we used to see at the Alpha Center even told me that at least one church in Shelby County only brought in peanut butter sandwiches when it was their turn. That's pretty sad, in my opinion. The Church, generally speaking, can do better!

Give Them Something to Eat

Notice what Jesus does in our text. He doesn't send them away. He says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat," (verse 16). Now pay attention to what happens next. "The disciples replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish,'" (verse 17). Let's clarify something here, going back to the last example, of the Alpha Center. We've served them hamburgers before, Lee's Chicken, one year we even served them a Thanksgiving meal. We give them the same things we would give ourselves on a regular basis. We don't live high on the hog and give them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The disciples have five loaves and two fish. John's gospel account records that the disciples got the five loaves and two fish from a boy (John 6). That's all the food they have. And Jesus tells them, "Bring them to Me," 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," (Matt. 14:18-19).

See, they aren't handing over bread and fish, while sitting back and eating filet mignon. They're giving the crowd – the people – what they've got. They're sharing what they've got. To put it another way, they're meeting the immediate need that's in front of them. And of course, we're told – as so often happens when Jesus is involved – "all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full," (verse 20). When Jesus is involved with meeting people's need – people are filled.

Jesus Meets and Exceeds Our Need

He ends their hunger. You can look at that in multiple ways. Physical hunger. Spiritual hunger. Emotional hunger. The hunger of acceptance. Jesus Christ meets the need, and when He does, there's much left over! He meets our need, and exceeds it! We're told that "Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children," (verse 21). So more than 5,000 people. It could have been 10,000 or 20,000 people He fed that day by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus does amazing stuff!

And He calls us to do the same sort of thing today. That's why we can't afford to stick our head in the sand, and ignore the things happening in the world around us. God doesn't avoid the world – He comes into it, in the most unlikely way – by being born to an unmarried girl, without even a cradle to be laid in. He loves the world. The people. And tells us we also ought to love them as He does. In getting our attention, and coaxing us to do that, sometimes God has to wrestle with us!

You know, we have a special election on Tuesday here in Ohio, on Issue 1. I'm not going to tell you how to vote – but pray, read the ballot, and then vote. Let the Holy Spirit lead you to vote the way that's best. Back in the Election of 2000, George W. Bush, and Al Gore were running against each other, and Bush won. Some of you remember that – others of you weren't even born yet! There was a ruckus over the hanging chads of Florida. According to Gore supporters, Bush stole the election. At the time I was working at Kroger, and one of my colleagues was adamant that Gore was the rightful President, that the election had been "stolen," and that terrible things would happen under a Bush presidency. As we got to talking though, I found out, he wasn't even registered to vote. Friends, if you don't vote, don't gripe about the outcome. That's all I'm going to say with regards to any voting. If you don't make yourself heard at the ballot, don't complain when others do.

Wrestling With Our Hunger

I've worked with children with disabilities now for sixteen years. Things have changed quite a bit since we were in school. When I was in elementary school at Hardin, Mrs. Jennings had a classroom with students with disabilities next to the restrooms close to the gymnasium. Those kids, from what I remember, never left that room. Once I got over to Houston, they had a classroom in the Junior High hallway, down close to the Art room. Again, you never saw the kids leave their room, except at lunchtime. Then, they would work in the cafeteria – to serve food to the rest of us.

At the time, I didn't think much of it. In hindsight, I suppose they were probably trying to give them some work experience skills or something. But knowing what I know now, doing it that way was wrong – on many levels. They were made to serve us, and they never, as far I know, went outside to recess, or went to Art or Music classes. They were there, but only when it was convenient to the rest of us. They were “the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine,” to borrow words from our Lord. Times have changed! Teachers today should recognize that all children have a right to be educated, and exemplary ones let children know they're valued!

Along the same lines, now that the business of Annual Conference 2023 is out on the West Ohio website and you can see there the recommendations which were voted on and approved, let me just say this: several of those recommendations were aspirational, which means they are not enforceable. It's where the Church, generally speaking, would like to be – a safe space where all people are welcomed. As followers of Christ, we are directed to love all people, without conditions. Anytime someone tries to help somebody else – tries to include somebody else – there will always be criticism. Look at Jesus. God Incarnate – the only Perfect Human – but He was horribly criticized by the religious, even to the point of being condemned to death on the cross!

Wrestling with the World's Hunger

I know some people would rather their money not go towards apportionments, when they don't agree with something the Annual Conference has done. I understand that. Sometimes I'd rather my tax money wasn't spent on things with which I disagree. But, as an American citizen, I'm still required to pay my taxes. So hear me when I say this: do two wrongs make a right? A lot of people think so, apparently. When we don't pay our apportionments to the Conference, we lack integrity. It reflects poorly on us. That's the bottom line. We're not being faithful in our commitments is what that boils down to, and ultimately it harms other people.

Two weeks ago the Conference office sent a missionary team over to Kamina in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Among other things, they helped bring supplies and materials to people for sustainable farming. Who do you think paid for that? Church apportionments. That's where the money comes from. See friends, apportionments are a lot more than just our share of the bishop's salary – not paying

them has unintended consequences which causes harm to “the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine.”

If we're going to have integrity, we sometimes have to wrestle with doing the hard things which we don't much care for doing. We need to give from our own loaves and fish, instead of sitting back, eating hamburgers and hot dogs, and tossing peanut butter sandwiches their way. Author Frederick Buechner once wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” He's calling us to be people of faith, who follow the Jesus Christ revealed in the Gospel – to be beacons drawing other undeserving people, just like you and me, closer to the Bread of Heaven. If we stay true to Him, making Him known for the transformation of the world – and being faithful, as He is faithful – God will take care of us. He'll see us through. He's never failed His people before, and He won't start failing with us!