

Matt. 14:13-21
Pentecost, Proper 13 Year A
Aug. 3, 2014
Blessing the Enemy

There is a lot to think about in today's lessons: Jacob's middle of the night wrestling, Paul's sorrow over Israel's rejection of the Messiah, Jesus' compassion for all who hunger.

The feeding of the multitudes is a familiar story – repeated six times in the Gospels, twice in Matthew and Mark, and once in Luke and John. Why was it so important to the early Christians?

Feeding the multitudes is a story of my own experience. I think back twenty years to our houseful of six teens and their friends. Dale and I would come home from work, not knowing how many mouths there would be to feed – and there was always enough. Except milk. Sometimes we ran out of milk.

Bread, blessed by Jesus, connects us to the Eucharist. The bread is prepared before the Sunday service, we do not know how many people will come – there is always enough.

A few years ago, one of my grandsons took communion here. When his mother picked him up later that day, he said that he had received food for the week, and that the bread meant Jesus would be with him. He was not quite five – he captured a profound understanding on his own.

Themes of abundance and being spiritually filled are readily apparent in this Gospel story.

We tend to resist the third theme, Jesus' message of distributive justice, or equal access. In the first century Roman Empire there were significant inequalities of access to food. That sounds a lot like today's global economy: a small group of elite with the power to control access to resources. Inadequate nutrition, contagion, sickness, result from the disparity of access. Shortened life span, lack of education, and war are consequences of access inequalities. Distributive justice is not everything distributed equally, but equal access to food, education, health care, to basic needs.

In the first century, and for many today, 'Give us today our daily bread' is an authentic cry. Many following Jesus did not have the resources to pack a sack lunch.

Matthew 14 (in which this story of abundant bread is told) opens with an account of King Herod's birthday party: a celebration of power, wealth and status at which John the Baptist's head is placed grotesquely on platter as if it were being served. There are celebrations of extravagant wealth and power in today's world: inaugural balls, royal weddings, opening ceremonies of the Olympics come to mind – and there are many others. As in the day of Herod, such celebrations highlight the disproportionate access

of the world's poor to needed resources.

When Jesus learns of the violent death of his cousin John, Jesus withdraws by himself. The crowds follow.

The disciples do not have enough food or money to feed everyone. They ask Jesus to send the people to buy their own food from nearby villages.

Jesus says, *you give them something to eat*. Their incredulous response is like that of many disciples over the last two thousand years. *Say what?* 'We are only a small congregation, we don't have the time, the energy, the resources – we can't feed the multitudes. We are not a big enough community to do that. We are getting older, we are tired. Let them find their own food.'

Jesus' answer to his disciples then is the same as his answer now: '*Bring what you have to me*. Don't expect to be a super-hero. Just bring what you do have to me.' Jesus blesses the gifts that are offered. In every telling of this Gospel story, the ending is that baskets of food are left after all are fed.

The Gospel is about the blessings that are released when we share the blessings given to us. The Gospel is about God's sustaining presence even when our resources seem inadequate to us.

Bring what you have to me. An awesome invitation to dream bigger, to change our ideas about God's power in the world. To envision abundance rather than assume scarcity. I think of that in connection with our Mutual Ministry Plan.

Last fall, Rev. Carol and I met with Pastor Emilio and Deacon Robin of our Cluster partner La Iglesia de la Resurreccion. Emilio+ said he had been walking the neighborhoods where many of the hispanics live in Mt. Vernon and Burlington and asking a simple question – what do you need? What would make a difference in your lives? Most often, they asked for help for their kids in education, some kind of after-school program. We thought, prayed and dreamed with Emilio+. What kind of money, time and energy would it take to acquire a bank of computers, create a place where kids could do homework with supervision, access interactive learning programs, learn skills needed to advance in school?

At St. Paul's Mt. Vernon this past Monday (my first day volunteering at the Day Camp), Pastor Emilio+ greeted me with a twinkle in his eye, *let me show you something*. We walked into his office – there were two long tables with 10 new lap top computers! Emilio+ said, *these are the start of the after school program*. *And let me show you something else*. Emilio+ was almost dancing as he whipped out keys and opened the door to a small room: there were several low tables, each holding a computer with oversized color coded key board and head phones. '*Look, the little ones can learn, too.*'

Access. Access to learning, access to education. Dreaming big. Abundance. It is a God thing.

What about Jacob, the trickster? Why is this ancestor of Israel seemingly rewarded with blessings? Jacob cons, cheats, manipulates his family, and then runs off. He not only gets away with this behavior, but prospers with wives, children and household goods.

Jacob's is a story of journey, and journeys are about transformation. Jacob is heading home after twenty years away. He expects a violent confrontation with his twin Esau, whose birthright Jacob stole. Jacob plans to divide up his family, servants and goods into two camps, so that Esau will encounter Jacob's wealth 'in waves' – the appearance of greater numbers is intended to intimidate Esau. But Jacob's life – not just his property – is in danger,

Jacob sends his entourage across the river because he wants to spend the night alone – perhaps to contemplate his guilt, perhaps to mourn the possible loss of his life in a battle with his brother. Courageous, in any event, to spend the night alone, unguarded.

In a surprise attack in the middle of the night, an unknown assailant wrestles Jacob to the ground. Jacob may well have thought his attacker was his brother Esau. They wrestle until daybreak. If you have ever (arm) wrestled, you know that the first person to relax, or to say *enough*, actually loses. The decision to end the match has to be mutual. Jacob has an inspired idea about how to end the wrestling – he asks for a blessing.

The assailant renames him *Israel*, because Jacob 'has fought with God and humans and has prevailed,' and then blesses Jacob. 'Prevailed' carries the sense of 'having learned from,' rather than winning. The blessing is a way of saying, 'I admire you. You are a worthy combatant.' Dignity restored.

In the light of the next day, Esau does not attack Jacob, Esau runs to meet and embrace him. Jacob says, '*truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor.*' Jacob learns and grows from this encounter. Jacob names the place of the mysterious night time attack Peniel (the face of God).

Is this Genesis story about Jacob wrestling with God, or one of God's angels? Maybe. But here's the point I hear today.

What is war? Who does it? How do you stop it? Jacob was preparing to do battle, expecting Esau's violent retribution for something Jacob had done twenty years ago. The story is about what happens when you seek a blessing from your enemy, and bless them in return. It is hard – if not impossible – to fight or disparage someone whom you bless, or who blesses you. Using the imagery of our baptismal covenant, when we look for Christ in every person, we recognize God's blessing in the other.

These themes – access to resources and God's abundance, and Jacob's wrestling in the dark night – collide in my thoughts about the current situation in Gaza. I visited the Holy land in

January, and I have heard and read the propaganda of both sides. We did not meet members of Hamas, or members of the Israeli government. But we did meet people who want peace, who want to live safely side by side without violence or fear. We met Christians, Jews and Muslims who talked of working together for peace.

In a pastoral update about Gaza this week, Bishop Rickel comments that the leaders of both groups – Hamas and the Israeli government– “have the luxury of playing ‘hard ball’ without looking into the eyes of those they would annihilate in a second.” The luxury of not having to look, to see the other.

The borders of Gaza have been closed – blockaded – by Israel for some time. In the past few days the only power plant in Gaza has been destroyed – leaving 1.8 million people without power, no running water, no sewage. 72 United Nations schools, hospitals and offices have been damaged. Two of the 11 full service hospitals for people living in Gaza have been destroyed and several are badly damaged. One of the damaged hospitals struggling to stay open is the Al Ahli Hospital, part of the Anglican Church and maintained by the Diocese of Jerusalem.

This is a war in which *access* of the people of Gaza is being destroyed: food, shelter, water, health care. It is an assault on the possibilities of daily life, on survival. A war in which the deaths, which have occurred on both sides, are completely disproportionate, out of balance.

What would happen if these descendants of Abraham and Jacob living in the land of the Holy and now at war with each other in Gaza, had the courage to look ‘the other’ in the eye, and ask for a blessing? What would happen if they embraced God’s abundance rather than assuming scarcity, blessed rather than feared their brothers? How do they stop wrestling with each other, how do they stop this war?

Jacob’s personal struggle wounds him physically; he is marked by a limp. Jesus’ struggle for the good of all brings him to the cross.

We are all, in some way, wounded travelers, and we journey together. With each other, with those in Israel and Gaza.

Through Jesus, God promises to give us the power to work for good in the world, especially when we are not sure we can manage.

From the mustard seed comes the larger plant; the yeast leavens the bread; from five loaves and two fish the needs of thousands are met. *We* are the mustard seed from which a great plant can grow; *we* are the small congregation that leavens the bread. *We* are the disciples who gather five loaves and two fish.

What we have becomes abundance in the hands of Jesus. It’s a God thing. What shall we do together?

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
Aug. 3, 2014