

“5, 2, 12 and A Blessing”

Aug. 6, 2017

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Romans 9:1-5

9:1 I am speaking the truth in Christ--I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit-- 9:2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 9:3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 9:4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 9:5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Matthew 14:13-21

14:13 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. 14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 14:15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 14:16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 14:17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 14:18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 14:19 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. 14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

We meet today on a hot summer Sunday in the relative cool of this place, if we think about it, to have our faith fed. You can no doubt recall occasions when what looks like a great meal is laid out, a Thanksgiving meal, your favorite birthday supper, the 4th of July cook-out, and you are compelled to wait until the blessing is said. In the home of my childhood my siblings and I used to practice a silent pre-blessing prayer that my Dad was hungry and the blessing over the fried chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits and green beans would be blessedly brief. We await a meal set for us this morning. Not a meal of the volume or scrumptiousness, or of the filling potential of any meal set out on any table in this dining hall of this place or at home or wherever we gather to 'break bread,' but a very important meal nevertheless and before we get there we await a blessing.

We gather today as scripture brings us to the confluence of two stories to talk a bit about food. Different stories, but stories that both in their own way have us waiting for a blessing.

Here's our old friend Jacob. On the banks of the Jabbok, where he, brave soul that he is, has already sent his wives and entourage crossing over. Over on the other side where the rest of his troupe is camped out it is the reason Jacob is back on this side. No food is mentioned in this tale but food is what caused the consternation dividing these brothers – food and a blessing. You remember Jacob's brother, Esau, who lost a bit of control because of his appetite and

traded away his blessing for a pot of stew, is over there. Jacob has a problem. Jacob is scared.

What happens in our reading that night, is Jacob left alone, stewing on his thoughts which bring about a wrestling match of epic proportions in which we find Jacob, all pent up and anxious and in truth as starved as Esau was years ago, needing a blessing to go along with ill gotten birthright. His opponent is an unnamed person who after an all night struggle, ends up blessing Jacob, the supplanter, with a new name and in need of an orthopedic surgeon. Now he is Israel. One who strives with God. This is about Jacob, anxious and troubled, eager to get on with life, on the way to wrestle with his brother, meeting up with God and gaining a blessing.

In our Matthew telling of the feeding of the 5K the anxious ones are Jesus' disciples who must feel that they are suddenly the hosts for this impromptu party on the hillside. In truth, all of those people the disciples are worried about feeding weren't there for a free supper. They were there looking for far more. They need a blessing. Jesus knows this. The disciples worry about food to eat. Jesus isn't much help and he tells them, 'you give them something to eat.' Even as Jesus steps in and a solution in the form of a miracle of distribution occurs we begin to understand what seemed to be hidden for the disciples, that for Jesus this isn't only about a blessing for food, it's far more about satisfying a greater hunger that exists within us.

Twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered, but the residual blessing that was bestowed on the crowd becomes a story told in this place and in this time to people who are just as eagerly gathered, just as eagerly in need of healing and wholeness, just as eagerly curious about what the one called Jesus has to offer to offset the ills of our lives and our world, to be blessed with a new name and a new calling.

We, naturally, spend a lot of our lives in the pursuit of being fed. All of us like to eat -- even when appetite becomes an enemy because it is either too demanding or because it just isn't there anymore. Billions of dollars are spent each year in this country not actually feeding people, but in persuading us to eat this or that, this or that kind of bread and hundreds of food alternatives. Last year the fast food guys, like MacDonalds and Burger King, spent \$5B helping us decide between a Big Mac and A Whopper. Food is certainly a central part of the discussion in the world economy and in the world's culture and in near the top of the list in the world's concerns. While tens of millions of us are over fed, one in every nine people are chronically malnourished. When feeding 5000 that means the disciples should have been concerned that over 400 people were starving. They were, of course without being aware of it, concerned with the global food problem, where do people go to get the food they need?

By the lake shore, as on the banks of the jabbok, there's a wrestling match happening. People are hungry and food is the daily problem with which they wrestle. People wait for the blessing – and the blessing is simply food to eat.

Maybe when we're sitting around tables upon which is an abundance of food that would feed a small village in sub-haran Africa, and we humbly bow our heads in gratitude for the blessing of a wonderland called a grocery store, maybe we should pause, not to wrestle with our guilt, but in the realization that it is within our means to change the reality of hunger for people in the world. In realization that we, among the people of the world, have indeed been blessed. And that we, as Jesus disciples in the world today, looking out over an expanse of people seeking the blessing of food, have in our pantries, in our bank account, in our pockets, the ability to do just what Jesus said – “you need not send them away – you give them something to eat.” And of course our tendency is to give Jesus the same response, we only have 5 loaves and 2 fish, we only have so much you know, if we give away those green beans what will we eat? (Pause)

Here's the deal – Jesus isn't physically present, sitting here across the table with a cup of coffee, helping us to fix the problem. But, he'll gladly wrestle with us until we get it. Until we understand. We are the church. We are the body of Christ in the world. If people need something to eat – we are supposed to take our resources, our loaves and our fish and feed them. And Jesus provides the miracle of distribution and abundance.

By the way, while we're waiting for the blessing. While we're waiting to come to the table and eat. While the nourishment of God's grace is awaiting us. While we've got that little internal wrestling match going on inside us because we are not real comfortable with what happens tomorrow. Here's some good news. Because we are blessed and we know it – children filled buckets, maybe 12 of them, with plinking coins. There's a pantry over in Harris Hall that's brimful full of blessings for some school children whose moms and dads wrestle with their hunger. A check for \$600.00 was cut earlier this week to help feed 30 children in Haiti for another month. Everyday a car leaves our parking lot with meals to share with older adults who are hungry for nourishment and for human contact. Every week a basket is filled that helps to fill the shelves of our community pantry at ACS to help feed our neighborhoods food challenged people and they get jelly too. In September people who wrestle with homelessness will find another filled refrigerator, pantry and a table with hot nourishing food as we make our promise to God become real for families in need. Can we do more? You bet we can. But it's obvious, unlike the befuddled disciples of Jesus – because he has blessed us – we know how.

And because he has blessed us after we come to this table – there's another table across the way set by some of our own who know how to graciously do what Jesus says, 'you give them something to eat.'

We are blessed and fed to be the church, to do what the church does. It begins with the blessing of this table in whatever moment our lives find us. At the ford of our Jabbok, on the grassy hillside, under an arbor of oaks, on the pews of a our church... we wait for the blessing... we are fed... and we go and do likewise.