

Blessed—Broken—Given: Sermon for Pentecost 9 on 2 Aug 2020

**Prepared by Rev. Dr. Barbara Fullerton for East Plains United Church, Burlington
Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21.**

In both the Bible stories today, there is a blessing, something is broken, and something is given—not necessarily in that order. Blessed—broken—given.

In the first story, Jacob ends up broken physically, asks for and receives a blessing, and is given a new name and a new identity.

In the gospel, Jesus is given some food, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it away again. What can we make of this? Let's see!

The Hebrew scripture story we heard this morning about Jacob is a very strange one. It is an old, old legend of two men (or a man and God/Yahweh) in an all-night wrestling match, the wounding of one of them, and the wounded man's subsequent change of name, with a blessing. It is one of many instances of the renewing of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. The name given to the site, Peniel, may have been a pun on the name of the nearby town (Penu-el), which in Hebrew = the face of God.

The story describes how Jacob was ready to return to the land he had left years before. As a result of this experience he became a different person with a new name and a new character. From this point on in the saga, he appears no longer as the deceiving trickster, but as a God-fearing leader of his people. He is disabled by the struggle, but still enabled to be the leader of his tribe and the agent of divine purpose. In other words, this is a conversion story in which God's grace transforms Jacob to carry the tribal tradition to a new stage in its understanding of God.

Hebrew names are often meaningful far beyond their simple phonetics. "Israel" is one such name. Vs. 28 cites the meaning of this name as "to strive with God and men, and have prevailed." "Isra-el" might mean "God protects" or "God preserves," and not be about wrestling at all. But with the hindsight we have of Israel's history, there isn't going to be another nation in history that spends as much time contorted into knots by contact with God. If ever there was a people that strove with God, it is Israel. Their survival to this day is one of the mysteries of history which they have a right to celebrate.

So, Isra-el, someone who wrestles with God. Jacob's whole life has been conflict, conflict with his brother, conflict with his father-in-law. Now he isn't just in conflict with humans. Now he's struggling with God. And prevailing, until God plays dirty and dislocates his hip. Subsequently, Jacob is both blessed and limping. His name is changed from Jacob to Israel. He is blessed. He limps, likely for the rest of his life, from the hip dislocation.

Israel's inheritance of a sacred land can be traced through the patriarchal stories all the way back to the wandering pastoral life of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the third quarter

of the second millennium BCE. The Jacob part of the saga tells of his departure from the sacred land because of sin, the sin of deceiving his father for his father's blessing to inherit the birthright of his elder twin, Esau. The wrestling match with God at Peniel happens on his way back home with wives, children, and property, many years later.

Scholars believe that the various stories probably circulated as independent legends, but expressing a common theme. The theme of inherited land is alive today as the modern nation of Israel's claim to the land Yahweh gave to their ancestors. The nation state created by the United Nations as the homeland of the Jewish people a little more than seventy-two years ago recognizes this theological interpretation of their history.

By no means do all Jews, and certainly few Arabs, recognize this understanding of Israel's history. Palestinians have been in the land continuously. And they, too, trace their lineage to father Abraham and the promises to him that his heirs will inherit the land. Some of the present-day Palestinians that I met seven years ago claim to be descended from the original inhabitants—the Canaanites—who were oppressed by the invading Israelites of long ago.

As we know, the dissension in that region continues to this day.

And yet—and yet The first century Palestinian Jew, Jesus, showed another way, a way of peace and sharing. His vision of the Kingdom of God was of a peaceful world where all would have enough. That is one interpretation of what the story of the “Feeding of the more than Five Thousand” is about—Enough. Sharing Enough.

When I was leading Stewardship Development work in the General Council Office, I grounded it in Asset-Based theory and this was one of my favourite stories to illustrate it. It is also useful in intentional interim work to focus on what is at hand, what is real and present and can be used? And in what ministries is God inviting us to use our real and present gifts? The story as told by the other gospel writers centres on Jesus using the loaves and fish offered by a small lad, willing to share his lunch.

Rather than focus too much on the “miracle” aspect of the loaves and fishes, let's look more closely at what this feeding story expressed. That appears to have been more important in Matthew's mind.

Jesus had just heard about the execution of John the Baptist. It was an ominous turn of events. Whether or not we accept the tradition that John and Jesus were related does not matter. The fact is that Jesus grieved for John, as the mentor with whom he had shared a close association at the time of his baptism and before that.

When he got the news, Jesus wanted to be alone, not only to mourn, but probably to talk with his disciples privately about the dangers he now expected would lay ahead for himself and for them.

The story implies that his departure in a boat was deliberately private, but that the crowds "got wind of it" and followed him on foot. The traditional site shown to tourists at Tabgha (pronounced Tavghah) was not far from the villages of Capernaum, Gennesaret and Magdala. It is an even shorter trip by boat across the northwestern bay of the lake. We were scheduled to do that when I was there, but weather prevented it. So we drove around the shore, possibly tracing close to the route the people took on foot.

When Jesus saw the crowds who had gathered on the lakeshore, "he had compassion on them." The wonderful-sounding Greek word so translated comes from the common word for entrails or intestines. We might say, "He felt it in his gut." We use body-part emoticons in social media, but usually hearts and hands, not intestines. Bumper stickers read "I heart you," with a big red heart shape.

No matter how great his own need for privacy and time to grieve, Jesus felt that the needs of the people following him were greater.

This very human setting places the feeding of the multitude—a miracle story repeated six times in the four Gospels, an indicator of its importance (!)—in the context of a spiritual meal. In all the Gospels, eating and drinking is frequently described in relation to spiritual need.ⁱ

The people came hungry to hear what Jesus had to say. Jesus fed that hunger, as well as their physical hunger. He didn't neglect one for the other.

Our modern Communion celebrations not only recall the Last Supper, but they also remember other occasions when Jesus gathered with his disciples for a fellowship meal, including this one.ⁱⁱ Here at EPUC, no one is excluded from our communion table. All are welcome, including children and anyone seeking to follow Jesus, remembering who all made up this crowd on whom Jesus "had compassion"—people of all ages and genders, seeking and following Jesus. And he fed them. All of them.

So, there is blessing, breaking, and giving in both of today's stories. Jacob is broken in his wrestling with God, but also blessed and given a new name. Jesus is given bread and fish, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them away again.

What do you wrestle with God about, like Jacob? What concerns are you wrestling with? What questions? What issues in the world right now? Clearly, COVID19 is one of them, as well as this transitional time in the life of this community of faith. If we thought the intentional interim questions and decisions were difficult before, how much more so in this pandemic!

In ordinary times, I would be preaching in the sanctuary at EPUC and wondering how many of you were there because you were hoping for an hour on Sunday to relax, away from the many rapid changes we experience in the world around us. Is worship just an opportunity to catch our breath, and not have to think about change? Surprise! It doesn't work that way!

We want the blessing without the injury. We want the blessing without the new identity. But we can't have the one without the other two.

Whenever we square off with God, there is a change in store for us. Are we prepared for that? What is EPUC wrestling with as a community of faith? Both our identity and our future, just as Jacob did.

Consider this additional thought: How, like Jacob, have we been broken? The longer I am with you, the more I learn of that part of your story. It's there, as much as you tried not to limp in front of me during our first two years together. It is part of who you are, of who **we are together**. How might that evidence of struggle shape a new identity with which we may limp into the future, carrying God's mark on us? How might the story of the Feeding of the 5,000+ shape our sense of identity and our future mission?

What is "Enough" for us as individuals to carry out Jesus' vision of the Kin-dom of God? What is "Enough" for our church to carry out God's mission? Questions to reflect on this week! Blessings as you do so!

For, always, always, we carry the blessing of God's presence and unconditional love with us.

ⁱ At the traditional site, sacred to Christians to this day, a small chapel shields a beautiful mosaic of the loaves and fishes in the floor beneath a marble communion table. The mosaic is reputed to date from the Byzantine era in the 4th century. Christian faith has hallowed the site with Eucharistic significance.

ⁱⁱ The enlarging of the size of the crowd by adding the note that there were 5,000 "besides women and children" (vs. 21), not in the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke, may have had special meaning for the community for whom Matthew wrote.