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Gospel lesson

Just prior to this passage is the story of how Herod beheaded John the Baptist as a reward for his daughter after she danced at his birthday party.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/wb-feeding-5000/>;
credit: Bible Society Australia
- The Wild Bible

Matthew 14:13-21

NRSV

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 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me."

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.

²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Word of God for the people of God

<Children's/Interactive time>

I heard in the news this week about damage done by tornadoes in various places. What shape is a tornado? What motion do its winds travel in?

<Let them respond>

What does it mean when something spirals?

<Let them respond>

Have you ever had something spiral? <Let them respond>

How did you stop your spiral? <Let them respond>

Sometimes when I have been in a spiraling situation, other people have stepped in to help me break the cycle. Do you always know it, when you are spiraling?

<Let them respond>

I think a lot of the time when we want things a certain way and things do not go that way, we become like toddlers unable to control ourselves, headed for meltdowns. Who is usually best at helping a toddler avoid going into a meltdown? <Let them respond>

Even better than a <use their answer(s) from above>, who is always there for us when our situation spirals out of control? <Let them respond>

When we spiral out of control, are we typically acting out of love or out of fear/sin?
<Let them respond>

So what do you think we should do when we start feeling like things are spiraling? <Let them respond>

May we always turn to God and put aside our sin, that our lives may be less stressed and more blessed.

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<Hymn "In Cana at a Wedding Feast"

by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette; tune UMH #203>

Message: Behold the Face



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/praise-break/week-1-tenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/week-1-tenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-praise-break-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Lord of all blessings,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may recognize Your presence more readily in everyday life and share our joy in You with all people. Amen.

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We start a “Praise Break” series today with “Behold the Face.”

“[We are invited] to recognize God’s presence in both ordinary and extraordinary moments. Centered on awareness, ... individuals and congregations [are to] connect action with reflection as they grow in gratitude, attentiveness, and praise.”

Back in 2004, I was under a lot of stress from Fire Department politics regarding the emergency squad on top of working full time and being mom to kids in grade school. It was when massive multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG) were first starting, and I started to play one as an escape from stress.

At first, I only played a few hours on the weekend, but then I got sucked into it more and more during the week. I started putting off sleep to play it and declining real-life activities. It got so bad after the first month that I was online almost half of the 168 hours in the week.

What started as a bit of stress relief spiraled into a destructive force in my life. I had to change what

I was doing, but it was a struggle for me to let go. Initially I just consciously set limits on my play time, and refocused on real-life activities. Eventually I stopped playing it altogether and have not played any other MMORPG. My life has been better since I stopped trying to live it in a way that limited how fully God could bless me, and dealt with issues I did not like in a healthier way.

Jacob had his own issue. All his life he had be grasping, grabbing for things that were not rightfully his. His situation with his brother spiraled so out of control because of Jacob's grasping that he had to go live with his uncle Laban.

By today's reading, Jacob's grasping had led him to the point where he had to leave Laban's home as well, which meant facing the family he had left behind, particularly Esau. If Jacob continued his grasping ways, it would go badly not just for him, but for his entire family.

But, God had made a covenant with Jacob, so God intervened to ensure that covenant could be fulfilled. God showed him what his actions were like to others: after Jacob wrestled all night, his opponent used a trick, leaving Jacob hurting.

How many times had Jacob done something like that to his own kin, his brother and his father-in-law? Neither was hurt as they struggled to live together, until a trick was played.

What is more, in reading deeper meanings in the

Hebrew language, God not only took away Jacob's ability to wrestle in dislocating his hip, God tore away Jacob's power, his grasping tendency. We see that in later stories, that Jacob shows a humility he did not have prior to this wrestling.

So, God renames him: no longer is he Jacob (translated as "grasping"), but Israel, which translates to "God prevails." Jacob understood that this was no light thing. When he talks about seeing God face-to-face, he does not just view – the verb has connotations of inspect/conceive/consider.

Jacob did some deeply spiritual wrestling that transformed him as a person. His life was not just preserved, he was delivered from his old self, from his sinful ways – God's way prevails.

How often do you truly seek God's face, truly open yourself to God's transforming grace? Do you feel the pain of humbling yourself before God like Jacob did? In learning to share love instead of seeking to have things always your way, how has your life changed?

Paul wrote about the struggle within his own heart. He loved the traditions of his people and felt pressure from them to deny Jesus. After all, they were the covenant people of God and they thought they knew what kind of Messiah to expect.

But when the Messiah (Jesus) came, they rejected Him. Paul spent three days blind before his spiritual wrestling with God transformed him, and then, after receiving profound wisdom and joy from knowing Jesus

as that Messiah, was left with sorrow, unceasing anguish, for those he loved that would not accept Christ. Yet, he did not force them to obey him, because he understood that true acceptance of Christ comes from the individual's heart – he simply offered the invitation unceasingly and with great passion behind it. Who have you invited to Christ lately?

I find it sad when people push exclusivity and wealth as goals of life. God does not. Jesus contradicted Herod's party by giving a different kind of banquet: one where no one was expected to return favor to the host; rather, their need was fulfilled simply because they showed up: they were there. They were blessed because they sought to know Jesus, because they wanted to behold the face of God and be transformed.

When we wrestle against God, we can only hurt ourselves. When we finish with holding onto sin and (finally) let go of it, our eternally patient God is waiting with love for us.

This week, let us praise God. Let us meditate upon the contrast between the pain of sin and the goodness of following God's commandments.

Think of where you have fallen short in sharing grace – who is hurt when you do not show love? Your enemies generally do not care, but your loved ones certainly do. So humbly strive to share God's love/Word/grace more fully, that you and all whom you encounter may "Behold the Face," be blessed, and praise God unceasingly.

<Invitation

UMH p.12>

Christ our Lord invites to His table

all who love Him, who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.