

“Cultivating Compassion”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Genesis 32:23-31 and Matthew 14:13-21

He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When 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. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Genesis 32:23-31

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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 14:13-21

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imagination, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that we carry within. I pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer. I pray that you would take the words that we've read from Holy Scripture and those words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the word of Jesus Christ. And may that word go forth and nourish your people, encouraging each of us to be faithful in all that we do and all that we say, and empowering us to have the faith in order that we might continue to do the mission and ministry of Christ. All of this, we pray in his faithful name.

Amen. I've read before that there comes a time in the life of a preacher who stands before their congregation on Sunday and isn't quite sure if what they're going to offer is a sermon or a train wreck. So we're going to take a poll today and determine if what I have to offer to you is a sermon or a train wreck. The only thing I ask is please don't vote till the end of the service on your way out. If you get up and walk out after the service, I will have a complex.

The reason that I say this is because, as I've been sitting with this famous story of the feeding of the 5,000 here in the Gospel of Matthew and knowing it so well from my beloved Gospel of John, I've been wondering if I might find a different way, sort of, to crack it open and to explain it to you so that there might be a different insight or a different understanding. I've wondered if what I have to offer will be, in fact, Gospel or some sense of garbage, just like, "What? What is he talking about? He can't do that. It doesn't make sense." And the reason that I've been holding this question and wondering about it is because of the work that I've done this week, primarily the gift and privilege of conducting a wedding yesterday of a beloved grandchild of this congregation. When I met with them to prepare for their wedding, they were very clear that they wanted a traditional service with traditional readings and that love was at the center of all the readings that they had. And to be honest, this is lovely and beautiful, that at the beginning of their life together, they wanted every reading and all of the reflection to be centered right in the middle of love. And I thought, well, of course, that's great. And then, as I was driving to the venue at Wash U to beautiful Graham Chapel, I kept thinking about all the things that we in our married lives encounter over the years, many of which you would not call love. And the tension that came to me was, how much do I share with them even in those brief few moments of a homily with the reality that life brings, or do I paint a picture of a glorious life of love without any ups and down, any bumps or bruises, just everything's perfect and wonderful because you're here getting married and God is going to bless you.

What I settled upon was an invitation for them to realize that what they were doing in that moment was laying down a sense of being an individual and instead claiming something that God knit together called an us, or a we, a married couple. I invited them to think that no longer could they say, "What should I do for my best interests," but that from now on they needed to ask, "What do we do for our best interests?" Life is not perfect. And yet marriages endure. In fact, we have some visitors with us today from Columbia, Missouri who 45 years ago got married in this space. I'm guessing if you ask them, has it always been a smooth road or easy, they would say, no. I don't know this for a fact, I'm just injecting my own sense of what married life can be like. And so when we come to the Scripture, do we come to it with this sense of Jesus laying out the perfect way for us to be in the world, or do we let the reality of the Scripture form what our life as loving, faithful people might be like? Do we believe the billboard or the advertisements that say it's all about you, or again, do we let the Scripture form who we are and how we interact with the world?

And so in a sense, I've done the unthinkable, I've taken Genesis, Jacob wrestling, and I've put it together with Matthew and Jesus taking five loaves and two fish, and I've looked at it as if Jacob becomes Jesus and it's all one story. That the wrestling of Jacob is the first part of what Jesus is doing in the gospel of Matthew, and by doing this I want to offer a picture of what a faithful, loving life might look like that's a little bit different than what the world offers us even after years, and years, and years of being married. The first thing we need to realize as we seek to be faithful, loving people in this world is that Jacob wrestled all night with a messenger of God, and ended up being injured in the hip and spent the rest of his life walking at the speed of someone who is now disabled. No longer did he run through life, no longer did he set records, no longer could he be the best he could ever possibly be, now he was a guy walking through life with a limp. I've not yet heard Nike

give that commercial of what it's like to be someone who walks through life with a limp. The world doesn't know what to do with someone like that, we want to fix them, we want to help them but instead Jacobs tells us that this experience of wrestling with God was actually a blessing and that he was in the presence of God, he saw God's face or continents or the glow or aura of God through wrestling and a limp.

What might it mean for us to love each other with a limp? And then as Jacob morphs into Jesus and the gospel story and Matthew, the protagonist who limps comes into hear that one of his best friends, the person who baptized him has been killed and he, the savior of the universe, withdraws from ministry. When Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. Jesus didn't rush in and fix things, Jesus didn't go back to find anybody who was hurting and start healing them like crazy, he didn't go back and get John the Baptist and put his head back on and bring him back to life, he didn't do any of those things that the world says Jesus should do. Instead, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself. He took a breath. He got his bearings. And maybe he just took a moment for himself to grieve that his cousin, his beloved cousin was gone.

We live in a world that does not know what to do with grief or grieving. It's hard for us to watch our friends cry or withdraw. We want them to get on with life and to stay engaged and to continue to do the things that they do in the face of loss but our savior shows us that withdrawing from the normal avenues of life is appropriate and faithful. Again, not what the world shares with us. So it's okay to wrestle and to walk slowly through life with a limp and it's okay to withdraw and to grieve and to be quiet and to figure out what it is that you must do next. It's okay to take your time and to not rush quickly. And then finally the story of the feeding which I truly, truly love because I think each of us can identify with the situation the disciples find themselves in. If someone asked you right now you give ice cream to everyone in this sanctuary would you think, "Oh, yeah sure I can do that." Or would you do, "Wait, what? I can't give everybody ice cream, I didn't bring ice cream, the ice cream I brought was only a gallon and it's out there and it's setup and I'm going to share what I can but I can't do that." You offer food to the homeless or the hungry, you take care of those who find themselves oppressed, you do whatever you can do to take care of every child who goes to Kirkwood who doesn't feel loved and cared for, you do it. "No, I can't do any of that."

But what Jesus and the disciples show us is that when we come together and do what we can, there is always enough. This is the great story of the feeding of the 5,000, not that Jesus took five loaves and two fish and miraculously turned it into enough food for all of them to eat but that Jesus by example took what people were afraid to give because they didn't think it was good enough but because they gave it, he blessed it, and broke it, and showed that it is okay to share the little bit you have to make sure that everybody is satisfied. And again, this to me is not what the world says to each of us. What the world says to us is that we need to have enough for ourselves and that we give out of our abundance. We need to be self-dependent, we need to be sure that we've got it all together before we do anything for somebody else and the gospel says, "No." The Gospel, in fact, says, "You become whole when you give out of inadequacy." You become blessed when you wrestle in the dark night of your soul. So like I said, I'm not sure if it's sermon or train wreck, gospel or garbage, but I believe in my heart that these insights might just, in fact, nourish some of you in a way that the world seems to have forgotten how to nourish us. It is okay to be who you are, it is okay to offer what you have and by doing so you become the blessed family of God. The body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.