

Sermon Pentecost 8
Genesis 32: 22-31, Psalm 17, Matthew 14:13-21
David Teschner
August 3, 2014

In the continuing saga of the Jewish patriarch, Jacob, we pick up the story today as Jacob is on the eve of a confrontation with his brother Esau. The last time we heard from Esau, he had vowed to kill Jacob because Jacob had cleverly stolen Esau's paternal blessing from their father, Isaac. Now 20 years later, God has told Jacob to return to his homeland, Canaan, with his two wives, eleven children, massive herds and numerous male and female servants. Jacob was a wealthy man.

When Jacob had sent word to Esau that he was returning, he was told that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. In Jacob's mind, this could only mean that Esau planned to attack him and his entire household. Jacob sent everything he had on ahead while he stayed back alone obviously unable to sleep as he awaited grave consequences in the morning.

We're told he wrestles all night with a man whom he later determines to have been God. Jacob holds his own except his hip is put out of joint. For his grit and determination not to shrivel and shrink but persevere against great odds, he gets a blessing and a name change. Jacob, the trickster, will from now on be Israel, or he who struggles with God.

Jacob is not the same man that he was when he had to connive to get what he wanted. He himself has suffered the consequences of being deceived by his father-in-law, Laban, more than once. He has become a more honest, God-fearing and hard-working man. In other words, Jacob has grown up.

His dark night of the soul at the ford of the Jabbok, we might say, is Jacob wrestling with his God-conscience. He is revisiting the wrongs he has done to his brother Esau and facing up to his own actions and the possible cost to him and the family he loves. He comes out reformed, but his limp will always be a helpful reminder of who he was and who he doesn't want to be anymore.

If the book of Genesis is, in part, a way of explaining why human beings are the way they are, certainly Jacob fits that bill. He is dissatisfied with his lot from the womb and early on cheats to gain an advantage. He eventually learns from the school of hard knocks. God never gives up on him and allows him to sputter and flail. Jacob appreciates

the value of family and right living and faces up to his erroneous/self-centered ways which may cost him his life.

Does it sound like anyone you know? I can certainly see myself in Jacob. I am very glad that God showed me the error of my ways early on before I could get into more serious trouble. Like Jacob, I am grateful that God was and continues to be patient and forgiving, and has never forsaken me. I believe God is always trying to redirect us toward more verdant pastures when we have gone astray.

Going to and from Crisfield, Maryland, last week, Ken and Debbie Newman's car guided us with GPS. I was thinking on the ride home that God is like GPS. A pleasant female voice is always giving the best and most efficient directions. If the driver fails to follow, she first tries to get you to turn around and go back. If that fails, she will start rerouting the car a new way. It may be longer, but if we are willing to listen, we will eventually get to the designated location.

I truly believe that the Spirit of God is always trying to get our attention and wants to help us do the right and best thing for ourselves and others. Often we aren't listening because we want to do it "our way." God isn't deterred, however, and will immediately begin formulating Plan B, C, D, E, F or G. Sometimes, only after we have suffered some unpleasant circumstances, are we ready to say "uncle" and turn to God for help. Humility and/or some abiding physical debilitation may be our ongoing limp so we won't run off ahead again and leave God behind.

Jacob finally arrives there today. Now he is ready to face his brother, Esau, and whatever happens next.

We find Jesus this morning needing some solo, quiet time apart. It's not going to happen though as his words of life are irresistible to the people in the Galilee region. It's amazing how quickly his need for solace is set aside and his compassion for people in need takes over. By the end of the day, however, his disciples' compassion is obviously spent. "...send the crowds away...," they say. "... so they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." I can only imagine their shock and surprise when Jesus responds, "...you give them something to eat."

We know this story well because it is recorded in all four gospels, with slightly different details, and in two gospels, there is a second miraculous feeding. Something more must have transpired other than just everyone pulling out the food they had brought and passing it around as well. (I must admit, I think everyone sharing is a miracle of sorts, too.)

This is a story of God's abundance and provision with definite liturgical overtones. Every Sunday, we take the communion bread, and we ask God to bless it before we break it and give it to everyone.

In today's story, five loaves and two fish equaling seven pieces of food fed 5,000-plus men, women and children during Jesus' lifetime. Last week seven adults – six from Christ and Grace and one from Good Shepherd, McKenney – went to Crisfield, Maryland, where almost two years ago, super hurricane Sandy blew five feet of tidal surge onto the land. Our group spent four days on four different houses in all stages of construction. We all worked hard using our various skill levels and had a great time doing it. While we helped four families get closer to moving into their new homes, there is much more still to do there.

We worked under the supervision of the Somerset County Long-Term Recovery Committee. This committee is made up of over 40 state, local and religious partner organizations. Church groups include: Christian Reformed, Baptist, Mennonite, Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Orthodox, and Episcopal.

As of July, faith-based groups had provided 825 volunteers. A total of 625 individuals had been served as well as 360 households. Nearly 180 homes had been repaired and at least 66 still need attention. Five new houses have been built, while six are in the process of being completed. Twelve new homes are yet to be started. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have already been spent with an estimate of more than \$320,000 needed to complete the repairs and new construction.

Joe Pinto, our new friend and local Episcopalian overseeing the Episcopal involvement in Crisfield, told us that Episcopal Relief and Development had contributed the most money -- \$500,000. Other committee members referred to him as the board member with deep pockets.

Joe invited us for drinks and hors d'oeuvres at his house on Thursday evening before we left. At that time, we presented him with a check for \$1,000 from the \$1,500 many of you contributed to help defray our expenses. He was overjoyed, and we agreed he would put it toward a salary for a skilled grant writer to request the remaining funds needed from corporations.

The investment of \$1,000 toward a salary seems small, but it will add to other money already collected for that purpose, and hopefully, net significant, large corporate donations. Like the fish and the loaves, Jesus can turn small offerings into enough and more. Our group was small and four days wasn't much, but we got one house completely ready for an older couple who had adopted two special needs baby twins

their mother wanted to sell for drug money. Hearing of that older couple's story made us feel our work was more important than ever, and they inspired us to see how incredibly big-hearted and compassionate God's people can be. More than what we did last week, we will always remember what that older couple, whose trailer was flooded out, are doing.

All we can ever do is offer up the little we have and are in God's service to humankind even if it is just our prayers on behalf of others. God will make sure it is enough and that nothing is wasted. So keep giving without hesitation. Countless numbers of people will be filled and so will you. AMEN.