

Struggles and brokenness shared and blessed.

Genesis 32: 22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

There are many stories of struggle in the Bible. These stories share the journey of brokenness transformed to healing through the compassion and love of Jesus given freely and openly to us through God and experienced in the spirit. How do such stories sustain us? How will feasting together on bread and wine during our act of communion offer new life? Today's stories are about endurance, tenacity and never giving up. Jacobs determination in wrestling the stranger is inspiring. So how do we find the strength to not let go in difficult times or when it feels like all hope is lost and that nothing will ever change? How do we find the compassion to feed the people who have gathered and show hospitality when all we want to do is escape and recharge to get away and just spend time with our friends?

Both stories today end with blessings. A blessing can be defined as receiving God's favor and protection, approval, and encouragement. When we are blessed, we are sealed in the love of God. Now blessings come in many forms. Sometimes in faith communities we bless symbols that help us remember and remain closer to God. Sometimes we bless our homes, our families so that they are safe, so that they are protected, and we're reminded that God's presence is in our whole lives not just in this sacred space. We are blessed when we are baptized. When we're baptizing, we are blessing others with the assurance of God's unconditional love. We are blessed when we receive the bread and the wine. We receive blessings of assurance when we confess our sins to God. We receive blessings on new journeys and when we move into different stages of our lives. We say blessings and thanksgivings for the food before we eat. Blessings have the power to transform us and like Jacob, to initiate a fresh start, a new beginning and to remind us that we are not alone for we are part of a great community of space and blessings often come after great struggle or in times when we think that something is impossible.

The story of Jacob often comes with great struggle sometimes many of us can relate to Jacob or Jacob has committed considered to be a bad boy of the Bible. He is known as a trickster, a thief, a schemer; someone who is not to be trusted. Jacob is also someone who had tenacity and someone who never gave up even when he was afraid, even when he felt alone. The story of Jacob wrestling this stranger who we presume is God shows us all it's okay to fight with God. Wrestling is human nature, part of being an animal in creation and it can lead us to greater understanding and transformation. Now some scholars have suggested that Jacob is wrestling his shadow side, his past mistakes. Others suggest that perhaps he thought that that attacker was his

brother Esau; Esau who Jacob had tricked and stole his birthright from. What we know in this: struggle is that, it's a great battle that takes enormous energy and that as they grapple with each other neither is able to overcome or overwhelm the other person and in the end Jacob tells the attacker, who wants to name this as a draw, that he will let go but only after he receives a blessing. Did Jacob in that moment come to realize that who he was wrestling with was God? Some scholars believe that this is true because of the length and the intensity of the struggle and in the end Jacob is marked for life and will always remember as he limps every time he struggles and walks and limps he will remember that God has blessed him.

I did some reading this week on wrestling. Some of you know that I'm more of a boxer rather than a wrestler so I had to do a little bit of research. I wanted to know why wrestling could be a good thing because sometimes we see it as something not all that helpful. Not something we really want to do and yet I found an article that talked about how wrestling is a good thing and there are 10 reasons why wrestling is important. Wrestling is defined as a hard struggle, a skill where you grapple with one's opponent striving to trip or throw your opponent off balance. I came across the article and it said this: "wrestling helps to develop balance, strength, coordination and body awareness. It also promotes personal responsibility and teaches self-awareness for you need to be aware that you are responsible for your actions. Wrestling develops mental and emotional resilience. Sometimes in wrestling we lose and there are setbacks; we think we're stronger and we aren't and those can be painful and uncomfortable, but they can help us to build up our resilience. Wrestling also develops leadership skills both verbal and nonverbal. It teaches discipline and accountability, promotes focus, and teaches self defence and it brings people from all backgrounds and cultures together. So, with that in mind in this struggle between Jacob and God, Jacob takes responsibilities for his past mistakes in this fight he finally comes to grips with his own mortality and fights for his life. Will this experience help him to now face his brother and ask his brother for forgiveness for all the things he had done wrong to his brother?"

Later in the story from Genesis, Jacob is again found alone. After this wrestling with God and he sees Esau and 400 men coming towards him. In that moment Jacob approaches his brother, he bows down not once but seven times. He humbles himself before his brother, he makes himself vulnerable for he doesn't know what Esau is going to do? If you think about it you've hurt somebody so much in your life you might think that he's coming to get you, but instead of harboring resentment, instead of striking his brother to make him feel the pain that he caused his brother Esau chooses instead to run to his brother and embrace him. In that moment they both weep. Esau extends warm hospitality and acceptance to Jacob and they're both changed and transformed by these experiences. Now what we will discover about ourselves and our lives when we wrestle with God only you will know. How will you be blessed when you meet God face to face during the darkness of the night? When Jacob was all alone Jacob faced God with nothing but himself and at daybreak when God knew that Jacob would not let go God blessed Jacob. God blessed Jacob with the love and compassion that God had to give.

After a long day of teaching and speaking with his followers Jesus blessed loaves and gave them to the people and all were fed and fulfilled. Jesus' blessing in that moment is an expression of trust in God. Jacob's wrestling which ended in a blessing was a sign of trust in God. Jesus' act of feeding the 5000 and blessing them is an action that flows out of compassion. God's act of blessing and allowing Jacob to have the victory is also an act of compassion. And Esau's forgiveness and reconciliation with his brother is an act of compassion. What these stories teach us today is that God is love. When we learn about what has led up to these moments of blessing, we come to realize that in spite of incredible pressure and turmoil what is most important is compassion for people.

We heard about what preceded the story of Jacob wrestling with God in the last couple weeks of our scriptures and here is what precedes the story of the feeding of 5000 which you may not know, for just before the crowds had gathered Jesus and his disciples learned about the brutal murder of John the Baptist. They were in grief and probably wanted to be alone to comfort one another, yet Jesus found the strength to do what God has called us all to do; to love one another as we would be loved, to show one another compassion. We like Jacob, like Jesus and the disciples are also called to be the body of Christ in this world. We are the hands and feet of Christ and are called to express our faith in concrete acts of love, justice, and compassion for all. May this feast that we are about to eat give us strength and resilience to do what we need to do and answer God's call together. May God bless this day. Amen.