

Sermon/homily August 6, 2017 Struggling with God Cara B. Hochhalter

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

Usually when you think of an "encounter" with God....you might think of light, a sense of peace, love, an inspired, awe-like sensation...you might even think of an idea that motivates you, that moves some situation along in a good way. Your encounters with God may be when you hear music that moves you, or when you are in nature and the beauty knocks your socks off...or perhaps you encounter holiness with an interaction with a person, with children....or even with a beloved animal. All these encounters with the Sacred in our lives....are beautiful, right?

So what struck me about this story with Jacob is that he "struggles" with God...they wrestle and God even knocks Jacobs hip out of joint!

What would it mean for you and me to struggle....with God?

Let us be in prayer: God who challenges us, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I am going to move fast through this shorter message...so stay with me! I want to hold up both stories. The Genesis text has Jacob, the one who jilted his brother Esau out of his birthright and his blessing by tricking his poor, blind old father, Isaac, and pretending to be the hairy older son. Jacob's mother Rebecca gets him to flee and now years later...he hears God telling him to go back to his homeland in Canaan. He sends gifts ahead of him but hears from his scouts that Esau is coming after him with an army of 400 men.

So, Jacob splits up his entourage and sends his two wives and 11 children to go across a stream. And then Jacob is all alone....he has an encounter with God...remember he had a similar experience when he dreamed of a ladder going to heaven and God blessed him then....and God will bless Jacob, even as deceitful as he has been, now! But first they must struggle.

Wrestling with God in the night... was it his guilty conscience that he wrestled with, was it some angel of Holiness who reached out to him....Jacob tries to find out his name. Whether it was dream or not, it became physical!...When daylight approaches, God is the one who tells Jacob to "Let go of my ankle!" (Did you know God had an ankle?)...but Jacob holds on and says, "Not until you bless me!" The nerve of him,

right?...But he is blessed, he is loved and his name is changed to "Israel"...which means, *one who struggles with God and prevails*.

Do you ever feel like you are holding on to God...not letting go...until you get a blessing? Holding onto God...longing for blessings...I feel like that sometimes...

Next, the story of feeding the five thousand plus the women and children, don't forget. Jesus, now is wrestling with something else...the hunger of a multitude of people who have come to hear him. This miracle happens in all four gospels, meaning it is one of the powerful stories of our Christian tradition.

It is a large scene...Jesus saw their hunger and had compassion. I love the ritualistic manner in which he takes one of the five loaves of bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it...and we do this here...taking our Communion bread, blessing it, breaking it and sharing it with one another... Maybe it will change the way you think of Communion if you remember this story and the acts we repeat in here. Jesus...relying on the abundance of God...to feed those who are hungry...and aren't we hungry, too?

Jesus' response was a call to action...rather than running away from a difficult situation...Jesus tells them to lean into it, as we might say, now. Somehow, their meagerness...in the hands of Holiness, God, Blessing...became bounty. Our inadequate resources, too, can become plenty....through the love of God.

How do you hear this story for your lives? Facing unmet needs can seem insurmountable. Lord knows we have multiple concerns in our world today. Perhaps God is struggling with us every day to wake us up.

A letter was brought to my attention this week. It is a plea for help. It was written by a diverse group of Christian churches....who happen to be Palestinian; the National Coalition of Christian Organizations in Palestine. You have to hear me out, I know that there are multiple issues of concern in our own communities and country as well as Yemen and Syria....but I became aware of this letter and I think God would wrestle with me if I do not share it with you.

Palestinian Christians are calling out to the World Council of Churches to say that the deprivations they are experiencing under Israeli occupation is overwhelming and intolerable. They are saying that they fear for the very presence of Christian communities....in this Holy Land. They say this is no time for shallow diplomacy but to defend their right to resist creatively and nonviolently. They feel they are on the verge

of a catastrophic collapse; and that this could be their last chance to save the Christian presence in this land.

O God, there are people calling out for help from that very hillside where Jesus fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. Open our hearts and our creative minds that we might respond in meaningful ways for them, as well as for those around us here. We call on your infinite Spirit to awaken our imaginations as we seek to live from your infinite and abiding love for all of creation. Amen.