

Sermon for 6 August 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15 (UMH 749); Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

“My Dad wore garters.”

When I was a boy, socks didn't have elastic; so the well-dressed man wore elastic bands that you clipped on your legs and snapped, like suspenders, to your sock-tops.

I thought of that image when I prepared to describe the Apostle Paul's thoughts about being Jewish, in today's lesson from Romans. His faith in Christ was inseparable from his Hebrew heritage. Although he was preaching a new movement into being, he would not deny, or give up, the energy and realism, of Judaism. Building congregations meant bringing Hebrews and Gentiles into one loving body. That means we Christians are forever repenting for our antisemitism. As in the confession we prayed on Memorial Day, for not leading the world in relinquishing nuclear weapons, we, the risen Body of Christ, continue to persecute the people of Abraham, even as we rightly criticize those in the nation of Israel who persecute the citizens of Palestine, and pray for the resistance to that by the people currently in the streets of Israel..

Stepping back to the first lesson for today, we confess another profound element of our faith as we acknowledge Jacob's wrestling with the angel, and his consequent limp. In a powerful image, scripture insists on both sides of our spirituality. God, represented by the angel, is fundamentally committed to relationship with us, wrestling through the night. Jacob, for his part, is just as stubbornly committed to the relationship, and pays for it with a lasting limp. I find this quite striking for modern ears. With all the denial of God's existence and importance in our world and literally our families, it's sobering to hear that we can't, and won't, exist without God. The Bible has more to teach than our age is willing to hear, as before, through the generations!

Going on to the psalm, there's not much light-hearted here, either. The church, and the synagogue, give us a pretty self-assured reflection here. I'm not sure I agree with it, either for Israel or Christianity. A bit more humility might send us both home with the blessing Jacob is so determined to get. We do limp out of here, it's true ...but can't we pray for more willingness to receive, and hope for greater patience, after an hour here with our Lord?

What draws us together, for sure, is the lovely scene of the Gospel according to Matthew. What do you see here?

Dinner on the grounds, for sure. Deserted surroundings. The crowds simply haven't been able to pull away from Jesus' healing presence, and here the day is closing in. Considerate disciples: “Master, we'd better send them home now...”

“You give them something to eat.” Matthew is gentler than Mark, whose rebuke at Jesus' suggestion is positively insulting. But what does this scene say?

Which is more significant: The disciples' suggestion to send the multitudes home, or Jesus' invitation that we feed them?

Can we believe this? Do we *want* to believe it?

Surely this time of conversation at the Master's side comes home to us in different ways. Both the Angel who wrestles with us, and sends us home with a different name and a changed step, and the Friend who generously lingers, and first heals, and then demonstrates the power we do not realize we share... both these views of God are like the parables we heard last week: The pearl without price, the mustard seed ...

The kingdom of heaven is among us. This is the good news, that we are always hesitating to see and fulfill. We are the crowds, hungry and isolated ... but we are also the ones who collected how many baskets full at the close of this day. This is the Word, as we both partake, and share, the feast of Presence here, prepared by so many gone before, who point the way for us still.

God bless this story ... this insistence from above, and from within us as a community of believers and doers ... that God is not only with us, but we are with God. It is a miracle. It is good. It is life, and life beyond now.

Amen.