

Year A – Proper 13 “Wrestling with God”

“. . . all ate and were filled.” (Mt. 14:20)

I don't know about you but I'm not really a fan of wrestling. I've watched the sport occasionally and admired the amazing flexibility of the human body and the power of muscles but beyond that, it's not too inspiring.

But I am a fan of spiritual wrestling. Now that's a sport that I have lots of familiarity with. And usually it happens at night. Just as I am about to go to sleep, the tussle begins. *“How am I going to address this or that problem/issue?” “Did I really respond well to so and so? I should have said . . .” “What on earth am I doing here? Is this really what you want for me, God?”*

And so on. Often the wrestling continues in my dreams and is still there when I wake up for the next day with no answers, only more questions.

Both Jesus and Jacob knew what it is to wrestle with God and each comes forth from the encounter with a different fruit.

We meet Jacob again after some years of acquiring both Leah and Rachel as his wives. He now has 11 children. It is time for him to return to his homeland. But doing so means that he will have to face Esau. Esau is the brother from whom he stole the birthright and their father's blessing and Jacob is afraid that he will kill him. So, he sends ahead a great peace offering of goats and cows and donkeys and servants (for Jacob is now very wealthy). But he continues to worry about the encounter. On the night before, he sends his wives and children across the river and he takes time to himself. And in his sleep he wrestles with the deep questions of his existence. *“Who am I?”* and *“What is to become of me?”*. Jacob wrestles with the other half of himself (for Esau is a twin) and the angel gives him a new name: Israel. He will always walk with a limp, perhaps reminding him of the flaw in his own character that caused him to be so deceitful, but also reminding him that he is blessed in his vulnerability.

Jesus' wrestling is similar but you didn't hear the back story in the reading. The Gospel starts with *“Now when Jesus had heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”*

What Jesus has heard that prompts him to withdraw is John the Baptist has died. And it has been an ugly death. For Herod pulls him out of the prison where he was placed for criticizing Herod's behavior in sleeping with his brother's wife. And, through a bizarre set of circumstances, involving the daughter of said wife and Herod's birthday, Herod has John beheaded. (Read chapter 14 of the Gospel of Matthew for the details). John has died because he told the truth. The truth is threatening. What can this mean? What are the implications for Jesus?

Jesus does what he needs to do. He withdraws for his own time of wrestling with the questions in conversation with the Father. The time alone is short (for the crowds pursue him) but looks what comes out his wrestling. He is put in touch with his passion and he feels the pain and need of the people and has com-passion. He responds to the people who so desperately need the healing power of God in their lives – people, like us, who are hungry for God. And he not only heals them, he pours out food upon them – more than they can possibly ask or imagine. The response of God to Herod's rejection of the message of repentance is not simply mercy and forgiveness. It is to take the meager offerings of simple people of meager faith and turn them into blessing and abundance. The response of God is extravagance, love, and a pouring out of compassion.

Now, we've all been caught up in the wrestling that's been going on in Washington. Not a pretty picture and more like the sport than the spiritual exercise that's presented to us today. But underlying it is basic questions about who we are and how we are to be as a country. And if that wrestling could take place with angels, the outcome might be more grace-filled instead of competitive.

We may not have much influence on that wrestling process but we do have our own process going on right here, as this wider community struggles to discover what it is to be in this new time of economic struggle and great prosperity for some. Can the town of Mt. Desert be reborn? It is the question that is being asked.

And your Vestry is looking at this Parish and asking questions about our future and how we can continue to be an integral part of the vitality of this town while at the same time live into God's mission of love and reconciliation.

And perhaps you have your own wrestling going on within your family or yourself as you seek to be renewed and refreshed.

Jesus does not give the answers but he shows us the way to engage in the midst of the questions that we ask and the dilemmas we face. He provides some spiritual guidelines:

- 1.) Instead of focusing on the needs around us, focus on the gifts that we already have. The disciples immediately see the need and want to fill the hole created by those needs. Jesus points them to what they already have. What works in our spiritual growth in life is standing still and becoming aware.
- 2.) Then we need to give thanks – become grateful. We can see what we have as a gift instead of not enough. Jesus takes what is available and gives thanks. Can we be thankful for our older generation of faithful folks instead of wishing we had more younger people in the church, for instance? Can we see that our own failures individually have another side to them – perhaps we criticize others because we really care so much, for example. Can we become grateful for who we are and the gifts we have been given?
- 3.) And then, of course, we need to give the gift away. It is in the giving that the abundance of life is made real – beyond our wildest imagination. The result is that we participate in divine abundance.

Jacob wrestles and gives to his brother Esau. Ultimately he has to move forward to meet him. Esau runs to meet him and they fall into each other's arms. The twins are made whole and their life together is enriched with the sense of God's face and presence.

Can we surrender the wrestling of our questions into the arms of the angels? Can we give thanks to God for the gifts that this town and parish already have? Can we give ourselves, our gifts, to be received and blessed?

Isn't that what the baptismal life is all about?
All can eat and be filled. It depends on us.

Amen.

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