

# SERMON FOR THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## THE VERY REV'D KEN GOODGER

Let us pray. Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives: give us discernment to hear your word, grace to relinquish our tasks, and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead, so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Occasionally the lectionary of weekly readings causes a dilemma. Unfortunately sometimes the dilemma is trying to work out what you are going to preach on, as none of the readings jumps out at you to give you anything meaningful to say, or so it seems. And on other occasions the preacher is faced with an embarrassment of riches, so much so that it can also be difficult to determine what you can preach on, such as in today's readings from Genesis and Matthew's gospel.

Our first reading from Genesis begins by saying, "The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok." But what 'night' is being referred to? Earlier in the thirty-second chapter of Genesis, we learn that Jacob is afraid that his brother Esau is after him, seeking revenge for all of Jacob's schemes and plots. Esau and Jacob's father, Isaac, had been tricked by Jacob into giving his blessing and thus his inheritance to his younger son Jacob, instead of his older son Esau. Because of this deceit, Esau despised Jacob, and Jacob fled to the land of his uncle Laban.

In the today's reading, Jacob comes out of hiding and sends messengers to his brother Esau. Jacob heard the report that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob has no idea what Esau will do when he sees him, which is why he is afraid. He appeals to God to save his life from his brother, and then sets up camp for the night. That brings us to the 'night' referred to in our reading. Jacob goes to bed, but sometime during the night, Jacob took his entourage and sent them across the stream, probably so that Esau would not harm them, which left Jacob alone. He is alone in the dark in a deserted place, until a mysterious stranger comes out of nowhere, and starts wrestling with him.

Although we aren't told the details, it was obviously a no-holds-barred fight. So-much-so that as the night goes on, the stranger sees that Jacob has no intention of relenting, and so he strikes Jacob on the hip socket, dislocating his hip. Even after suffering such a significant injury, Jacob does not give up. The scuffle continues until Jacob's adversary says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." That Jacob recognizes his adversary as somebody who is able to give him a blessing is a clear-cut clue that this is no ordinary man.

The still unknown stranger answers by asking Jacob's name. This seems an odd thing to ask, but if you remember the story of when Jacob took away his brothers inheritance, when Jacob's blind and ailing father asks him who Jacob is, he says, "I am Esau." So in a real way, Jacob is being asked to admit who he is and to admit what he has done in the past.

After Jacob gives his name, the stranger says to him, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The name change from Jacob to Israel confirms that Jacob's wrestling opponent is not simply a "man." The word Israel translates as, "God strives." Jacob has been wrestling with God.

What I take away from this story of Jacob's wrestling match is the sense that God's blessing isn't always easy. The great struggles of our lives can also be struggles with God as well. This can be confronting to those of us who believe our relationship with God has to be good all the time. This story suggests otherwise. The God who wrestles Jacob is not a God who keeps his distance, minds his manners, and who we need to keep happy by being good little girls and boys. This is a God who wants to get involved: a God who won't let go.

And we also see that God does not let go but gives a blessing in our second reading from Matthew's gospel for today. And like the reading from Genesis, we start with the need for a little context.

Today's reading from Matthew starts, "Now when Jesus heard this..." What he has just heard is that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been killed by King Herod. And so we see Matthew comparing two feasts: one hosted by Herod which resulted in the death of John the Baptist and another which is a blessing, as a large crowd is fed by Jesus near the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus once again finds himself being followed by a large crowd of people. And so, as he comes ashore, he sees them and has compassion on those who come to him. Matthew then states that, "When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." The disciples' suggestion that these hordes of people go buy food isn't just unrealistic – they are, after all, out in a deserted place: it's the opposite of Jesus' compassion towards the crowds. They are basically saying they don't care about these people. "Let them look after themselves" is what they are really saying. But Jesus tells his disciples that they should feed them.

The disciples reply is also telling, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." The disciples see the lack, what is missing, rather than trusting in God to provide. And so using words and actions that will be used by Jesus at the Last Supper, Matthew illustrates what happens when you move from a view of resources as scarce: "we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes" – to one of plenty and gratitude. Jesus orders the disciples to bring him the little they have, and he blesses, breaks and shares. And what is provided is more than enough for everyone, in fact there are leftovers!

Today's readings are a timely reminder to us that even in the midst of uncertainty and fear, that God is striving with us and for us, blessing us even when all seems lost. God's abundance is far more than we can desire or deserve, but God will bless us anyway. This is also the God, who challenges us to wrestle with him, to keep on struggling and to trust in God's promise that the blessing will be ours.