

“FINDING BLESSINGS IN OUR STRUGGLES”

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

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I want to begin my sermon by saying an additional word to our graduates. In honoring you today, we obviously want to convey our congratulations that you have reached your lofty goal; but we also want to express our empathy for what you had to go through to get there. The past few months have been a struggle for all of us, but they have been especially so for you. You had to complete the requirements for your diploma when you couldn't even attend class, then adapt to less-than-desirable ways of celebrating your graduation. You lost experiences that are unique and unrepeatable and that you will never get back. During a season when you were supposed to be rejoicing, you may have found yourself grieving. Your high school career did not end as you anticipated, and your college career will start out with huge uncertainties and adjustments as well.

It would be presumptuous for me to say that I feel your exact pain, but I do feel enough of it to empathize with you. Most of you know that I will be mandated to retire from full-time ministry next June, which means that I will be relinquishing my role as your pastor. I had always envisioned this final year going in a particular way, but it is likely to go in a very different way. For the foreseeable future, I will have limited in-person contact with people I deeply and dearly love. We as a church will have limited opportunity to worship, study, and fellowship together; to welcome new members, to serve the community, to plan for the future. Certainly not every day, but some days, I feel like I'm in my senior year and that the prom and commencement have been canceled! I say this not to indulge in self-pity, but to say to our graduates, "I empathize with you. We as a church family empathize with you."

Thirty years ago, I was serving as a hospital chaplain in Cincinnati, Ohio. While I was assigned to the maternity ward, I attended a memorial service for infants who had died in childbirth on that unit over the previous six months. A small number of parents and other relatives gathered in the hospital chapel that night. The staff chaplain began his remarks to the family members by acknowledging that their grief would likely be long and complicated. They would hear words of consolation that are well-intended but not helpful: "God needed another angel in heaven." "You can always have another baby." "Your loss would have been a lot worse if your child had been a teenager or an adult." "You're young; you'll get over it." The chaplain noted how all these comments minimize a parent's grief. They assume that the death of an infant child is easier to deal with than the death of an older child. Then the chaplain made a statement to those grieving parents which I will never forget. He said, "There are some losses in life that you don't get over; you just learn to live with them, like learning to walk with a limp."

The Hebrew patriarch Jacob could certainly verify that observation. In today's Old Testament reading, Jacob is returning from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan, knowing that he will have a fateful reckoning with his angry brother Esau. Jacob takes his family across the Jabbok River in the middle of the night, then goes apart by himself. His solitude is interrupted by a stranger who engages him in physical combat.

The story of their struggle is intriguing because it is so ambiguous and mysterious. In Charles Wesley's great hymn which we heard a few moments ago, Jacob refers to his opponent as a "traveler unknown." Here is Jacob, fighting for his life, and he doesn't even know who his adversary is. Perhaps it's too dark for Jacob to see clearly, or maybe his opponent has disguised his identity. In any case, Jacob is asking, "Am I wrestling with another man, with a night demon, with a messenger of God, or with God directly?" The text is so layered that one could identify Jacob's foe as any or all of the above. Moreover, which one of these two men initiates the conflict, and what are they fighting about? Jacob is a fighter, so we wouldn't put it past him to pick this fight. Or it may be his opponent who throws the first punch; if so, does he intend to rob or harm Jacob, or does he merely wish to teach Jacob a lesson he won't forget?

The text leaves all these questions unanswered; it simply describes the struggle and how Jacob emerges from the struggle. In the midst of a furious fight, the stranger throws Jacob's hip out of joint, and Jacob walks away with a limp. He is a wounded man, permanently marked by this encounter, and not just physically. In addition to losing his full mobility, Jacob also loses some of his pride, his bravado, his sense of invincibility. His struggle leaves him chastened and humbled.

God knows, you and I experience these sudden assaults and come out of them with the same results. It may be an actual physical assault – by a bully at school, by an abuser in the workplace, by a virus in the very air we breathe. It may be a sudden, unanticipated, unsought encounter with a hard truth: "You won't be going to class, either this semester or the next." "It's cancer." "Your dad died." All of a sudden we're struggling with horror, hope, death, life . . . God. And we lose some things in the midst of our struggle: our best-laid plans, our false confidence, our belief that we are in control of everything. Like Jacob, we discover that "there are some losses in life that we don't get over; we just learn to live with them, like learning to walk with a limp."

But notice: Jacob comes out of his struggle with something more than a limp. He proves to be a tenacious fighter, and he wants some kind of reward for his effort. When his adversary says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking," Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). What a remarkable request this is! Jacob, the man who is always out to get something, is determined to get a blessing in his struggle – and he gets what he asks for, this time by honest means. Whoever his opponent is – a mortal man, a nocturnal demon, an angel in human form, or the living God – he gives Jacob a new name, Israel, and the course is set for Israel to father twelve tribes with whom God will have a special covenant relationship. The thing to notice is that the blessing does not come automatically to Jacob; he has to seek it, ask for it, even demand it.

I cannot help but wonder if you and I are finding blessings in our struggles today – that's right, blessings in the midst of a health crisis, blessings when our calendars are being constantly revised, blessings when we're just tired of it all. Even in ordinary times, when our plans go awry, when we're experiencing unexpected difficulty and deep disappointment, the blessings in our situations are seldom obvious. We have to look for them and be consciously aware of them when they appear.

I grew up in a church that loved to sing the old gospel song, "Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done." What the hymn implies is that it's much easier to enumerate our struggles than our blessings. I can quickly give you a list of

troubles, challenges, and inconveniences I face every day; but if you ask me to name the positive things going on in my life, I have to be more thoughtful, more perceptive, more deliberate. To count our blessings means to focus on what has been given to us, not just on what has been taken from us. It is to take inventory of what we have as well as what we don't have.

And so, you who are graduates had to struggle to get to the finish line, and when you got there, you had a very small audience to cheer your victory. The irony is, you have actually received more attention and more admiration than the usual graduating class, because you overcame so much to earn your diploma – and that's a blessing. As a church, we're struggling with health and safety concerns that have driven us to worship in an outdoor setting. But the blessing is that we are able to worship at all, that we're finally able to worship together, that today we're even able to partake of the sacred meal together. Are you and I fully aware of what a blessing this is? Are we appropriately grateful for it? Are we determined not just to make the best of this blessing, but to make the most of it?

We see the disciples of Jesus facing this same challenge in today's Gospel reading. After John the Baptist is killed, Jesus withdraws to a deserted place, not to hide out but to seek God's guidance and strength before he makes his next move. The crowds follow Jesus and spoil his solitude; but he is moved by compassion for them and heals those who are sick. Then nightfall comes, and the disciples have had enough. They don't want the responsibility of feeding the crowds supper, so they ask Jesus to send the crowds away and let them fend for themselves. When Jesus insists that they do their duty and provide food for the hungry, the disciples protest that there isn't enough food to go around. Five loaves and two fishes will hardly feed a multitude.

Do you hear it? The disciples are having their own struggle – the struggle to be unselfish and compassionate. And is it any wonder? They are focused on what they don't have, not on what they have. Jesus, by contrast, sees the potential for generosity even with the meager resources at hand. Notice: what turns this situation around is a blessing. Jesus takes the loaves of bread, blesses them, and suddenly there is enough food for the whole crowd with plenty to spare. The “blessing” in this instance is a prayer of gratitude. Jesus chooses to count his blessings, to give thanks for what he has rather than fret about what he doesn't have; and it is this act of gratitude that produces the miracle of abundance.

Early on in the pandemic, I learned that the Connecticut Community Foundation was going ahead with its annual spring charity event, raising funds for dozens of helping organizations in our state. I confess to you that I was initially skeptical – not about the cause but about the timing of the appeal. With so many people struggling financially, with all the economic uncertainty and hardship, I doubted that this was a good time to be asking for charitable donations. I was wrong. Would you believe, the Connecticut Community Foundation fundraiser was an astonishing success. Why? Because donors counted their blessings in the midst of their struggles, because they focused on what they had, not on what they didn't have; and what they had, they wanted to share.

We've seen this same pattern of gratitude and generosity in our own church. At a time when one would expect our members to tighten their purse strings, our pledged giving has exceeded all expectations. Our giving has been stronger than a year ago when our personal finances were more predictable and secure. Beyond that, a number of our members have gone the extra mile, contributing over \$6000 to a relief fund to assist persons facing a financial emergency.

None of this would be possible unless you found blessings in your struggles, unless you focused on what has been given to you, not on what has been taken from you.

During these perilous times, you and I are struggling with a pandemic and a host of problems associated with it. But let's not turn loose of our adversary until we have received a blessing – and share that blessing with others.