

**Changed for the Better**  
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**Genesis 32:22-31**

<sup>22</sup> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' <sup>28</sup> Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

**Matthew 14:13-21**

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup> 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.' <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' <sup>17</sup> They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' <sup>18</sup> And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' <sup>19</sup> Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

How many times has this happened to you? You're off to make amends with your only brother, from whom you essentially stole his entire inheritance, bringing along your whole family, as well as a good number of your animals as a peace offering, when, all of a sudden, as soon as your last family member has crossed one of the streams that feeds into the Jordan River, you get jumped by an unknown man who wrestles with you through the night until the morning. When he realizes he can't overtake you, he asks you to let him go and you tell him you will if he will bless you. Happen often? Me neither.

Before I learned Hebrew, I had no idea how it was that Jacob realized he had seen God face to face. Being told "you have striven with God and with humans" could refer to any time in his life; how could he be sure the "God" part referred to that very night, I wondered. And then came Hebrew. The name he was given by the mystery man, Israel, was the clue. With few exceptions, whenever you see "el" at the end of a name, you can know God is involved. "El" is short for "Elohim." Ishmael means "God has heard," Daniel means "My judge is God," and Nathaniel means "gift of God." Israel means "God

strives.” The name given Jacob after his struggle told him clearly that he was struggling with God. And the name he gives the place speaks to what happened; “Peniel,” and its alternate “Penuel,” mean “face of God.”

The story of Jacob is so unique and unusual and, yet, somehow, despite its strangeness, it feels familiar. We may not have physically wrestled with God, nor seen God face to face, yet most of us have struggled with God at some time in our lives. God challenges us and we struggle. To be clear, I am not saying God sends us suffering. God does not bring suffering upon us. When God challenges us, if we choose to accept those challenges, we can come out better people - but more about that in a minute. We suffer from natural and man-made causes; that is part of our human condition. God uses our suffering but God does not give it to us. If there is no more sorrow and no more pain in God’s kingdom, as we trust from Revelation, then we can be assured God does not want those things for us here on earth. We pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Our God of love does not seek to cause us pain or heartache. We pray that pain and sorrow are no more, just as we pray that peace fall upon all nations, when we offer the Lord’s Prayer. So if suffering is not the way God challenges us, then what is?

A few years ago a trend began in marketing aimed at Christians, promoting items emblazoned with “WWJD?,” short for “What Would Jesus Do?” Don’t get me wrong: it’s good to have something to help us remember to consider how God would have us behave. I’m not certain a rubber bracelet is the answer but the idea helps answer the question of how God can challenge us. God challenges us to love the unlovable. God challenges us to live into our potentials, not up to our minimums. God challenges us to share our gifts. These challenges can be especially difficult, particularly if there is fear in our way. A friend of mine, who is by all means a gifted preacher, considered first putting off seminary, and then avoiding congregational ministry, because of a fear of public speaking. Thankfully, she finally decided her call was greater than her fear and those who have had the good fortune of hearing her preach, as well as lecture on the fight against human trafficking, are now the lucky recipients of a gift she almost didn’t share.

Jacob’s challenge is portrayed externally- a wrestling match with God - although we can be sure he did much struggling internally about making amends with Esau, even before he met up with God alongside that stream. The disciples’ challenge in today’s reading was not nearly as tangible, but equally real. What challenge, you ask? All they had to do was distribute basket after basket of food after Jesus multiplied it, right? Listen again closely.

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ <sup>17</sup>They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ <sup>18</sup>And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ <sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to

heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Twelve men were given five loaves of bread and two fish and told to make sure everyone gets enough, all five thousand men, besides women and children. A dinner host's nightmare! There is no can of almonds in the pantry, no frozen chicken breasts in the freezer. What could they say when they handed out that last piece of fish and that last crumb of bread while a sea of others watched them with anticipation? Can you hear the "why do they get food and we don't?" and "how could you feed those men when there are hungry children here and nursing women?" and the various whines of children and adults alike? The disciples may have looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and even trembled a bit but they went out and did as Jesus told them, becoming agents of a miracle.

Have you ever taken on something that you figured wouldn't go well but then went better than you imagined? Probably a more likely scenario than wrestling with God, I suppose. I know I have and I know the feeling of accomplishment I felt and the surge of confidence in my own abilities that I felt. My mother-in-law is a two-time breast cancer survivor and so, about ten years ago, she, my sister-in-law, and I all signed up for the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk. Not only were we going to walk for almost 60 miles, but we also each raised almost \$2,000 in pledges just to be able to participate. I hated, truly hated, the idea of asking people for money so reaching my fundraising goal was an achievement of its own. Training for and then walking 56 miles in three days, and doing twenty-one of them in one day, was something a non-athlete like me could not ever have expected to succeed at. I figured, at best, I might limp in at the end, many hours past most. To have finished and finished still feeling strong were tremendously empowering for me. Taking on my own challenge like that changed me for the better.

The disciples and Jacob accepted the challenges presented to them by God the Son and God the Father and they prevailed. It is important to realize God did not put forth the challenges and then disappear. In both stories, God is there with them through the challenge. The same is true for us. Any challenge God presents is not one we take on alone. God stays with us through that challenge. As pastor and former Stated Clerk of our General Assembly, Clifton Kirkpatrick, has said of the passage in Matthew, "this Gospel story reminds us that when we need it most, God will give us the power to work for good in the world, a reality many of us have discovered when faced with situations we were not sure we could manage."<sup>1</sup> God sticks with us and, if we stick with the challenge, we are changed for the better.

We all have personal challenges, of varying degrees, some are striving with God and some are striving with humans and some are both at the same time. Into each of our lives will come painful, very

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 310.

sad times. You may wish they hadn't happened, and your church family shares your grief and your pain and your loss, as does God. Still, today you may find yourself on the other side of such a difficult time. Can you think of ways in which you have been changed for the better? Do you have more compassion for those in similar situations? Do you volunteer or support organizations now that you did not before? Do you pray more? Do you reach out to others more? Maybe you are still striving with your difficult time. Maybe you are still striving with God. That's OK, too, for God is with you. And if your striving includes big emotions, like anger and doubt, know that God is big enough and loving enough to bear our emotions. God was there before, God remains through it all, and God is waiting on the other side. And even in the midst of the challenge, you may sense yourself changing for the better; it isn't like the flipping of a switch.

We, as a church, have challenges, too. It is no secret that we are a small church. It is no secret that many of you who sit in the pews have already put in decades of service to this church. When I was interviewing with you, I asked a question of the search committee "Where do you see the church in five years?" The answer I received made my heart ache for you: "We want to still be around." Wouldn't it be great if God sent us dozens of younger people with a love for this church which matches yours? Our challenges would be no more. But that's not how God works. Assistant Dean and Assistant Professor at McAfee School of Theology, Dock Hollingsworth, says, "Jesus is calling upon us to dream bigger. Jesus did not say, 'Give me those fish and that bread, and I will feed them.' His first call was for the disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world."<sup>2</sup> Jesus gave the power to the disciples to make two fish and five loaves turn into enough to feed over five thousand and still have twelve baskets of leftovers. God has given us faith and means and power to keep this church a servant to Christ's will for the next five years and even more. We are called to use our gifts and rise to the challenge.

In the coming months, we'll be talking together about how we feel we are being called and what we are being called to do. Only after we've used our imaginations and dreamed outside of our limits, dreamed bigger than we think we should dare, only then will we talk about how to do it. If we have heard God's call correctly, God will help us find the way to carry out our plans. "God will give us the power to work for good in the world."<sup>3</sup> Just as it is with us as individuals, if we as a church rise to God's challenge, God will be with us and we will be changed for the better.

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 313.

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 310.

Let us pray: God of love, grant us courage to rise to your challenges so we might make this part of the body of Christ even better. Amen.