

Proper 13 Year A

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Rev. Dr. Robert Honeychurch, Interim Rector

Some topics for discussion are often ruled “out of bounds” in public settings as being too controversial or too private. So people are trained at an early age what are acceptable conversational themes and what are off-limits. Certainly, there are the Big Three that everybody knows about – sex, politics, and religion. Depending on the setting, however, people are often quick to avoid other topics as well, such as work, or relationships, or even sports. But it seems as though there is one topic which is universally acceptable to discuss, and even complain about. I’m talking about the weather. Even in a place as beautiful and temperate as Santa Barbara, it’s easy to complain about it being too hot, or too cold, or too wet, or too dry, or too windy, or even just too boringly the same for days on end.

So, in honor of the one safe topic I know of where complaints are acceptable, let me whine about the weather for a few minutes this morning. I’m sick and tired of it. And I know many of you are as well. You don’t have to look far to be reminded that California is in the midst of a record drought. Watching stories on the evening news about wildfires ravaging our state right now, or a quick glance at our withering lawns and our skyrocketing electric bills will quickly confirm that. My little apartment up in San Roque doesn’t have air conditioning, so I do my best to sleep at night with all of the doors and windows wide open and as many fans as I can find roaring away at full blast all night long. But it only helps so much. As a result, I spend much of the night tossing and turning, unable to find a comfortable position or a quiet enough mind to get much sleep. And a

few nights of trying to sleep in Dallas, Texas in the August heat earlier this week did nothing to change my attitude.

I can imagine that it might have been a sultry night just like those we've been having around here lately where Jacob found himself in this morning's first reading. If you've been paying much attention to the readings in church these past few months, you will have noticed that we've been hearing the most amazing cycle of adventures which tells the story – which tells OUR story – of our earliest fathers and mothers in the faith. As good as anything you're going to see on daytime television, this series of readings reminding us of our own roots in the family story of Abraham and his wife Sarah and their family... and their son Isaac and his wife Rebecca and their family... and their son Jacob and his wives Leah and Rachel and their family... is filled with drama and intrigue, with treachery and sexual indiscretion, with attempted murder and family fracas which would rival anything our own Doug Davidson and his fellow cast members on *The Young and the Restless* might ever be able to imagine... you know... all of those topics which we were taught to avoid in public conversation – especially in places like church.

This morning's installment in the family saga centers around the main character in the third generation of the family, Jacob, the younger son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. Now, as many of you know, Jacob was not the most reputable of characters in the Bible. To understand the full impact of today's story, it's helpful to really understand who Jacob was, and how he found himself in that predicament. Jacob found himself along the banks of the River Jabbok that night because he feared for his life, and for the lives of his family members. He was sure – for pretty good reason – that his elder brother, Esau was out to kill him. You see, Jacob had stolen from his brother, he had lied to him, and he had tricked him out of

the family treasures. And now Jacob was on the run... with Esau hot on his heels and closing fast. So, rather than subject his entire family to the grim ordeal which lay before him, Jacob sent them on ahead across the river, and then he turned back to await his destiny that fateful evening.

In the heat of that sleepless night, instead of encountering his brother Esau, however, Jacob was confronted by someone else, someone Jacob could only describe as an angel. In reality, as Jacob came to discover, he had spent the night wrestling with God. And after a night of pitched struggling, where neither side could gain the upper hand on the other, God cheated, and threw Jacob's hip out of joint so badly that, for the remainder of Jacob's life, he would walk with a limp. But still, Jacob would not let his opponent go unless God would first give him a blessing. Finally, God relented, and Jacob received that blessing... a blessing which would affect not only him, but even his entire family, even the entire family of God which grew from his lineage, even us to this very day. God blessed Jacob, and changed Jacob's name, and gave him a new name, and God called him "Israel."

We live in an age of societal regression, I believe, where most of the adults of the world have decided that it's easier to act like children. It has affected our governments; it has affected our schools; it has affected our businesses and corporations; and yes, it has even affected our churches. And a part of that societal regression has created a world where many of us don't want to do the hard work of being adults... that we really just want mom or dad to come in and fix things, and make everything right, and do all of the hard work for us. We want our elected officials to take care of us in our old age. We who are parents have come to believe that it is the job of schools to educate our children rather than being

responsible for that education ourselves. We allow companies and advertisers to tell us what to buy or what to eat or what to wear rather than us telling those same companies what they ought to be producing. And we fall silent before God as well, assuming that if we just sit still long enough, God will finally get around to dealing with us and our needs. The tag line for “Christian Mingle”, one of the on-line Christian dating services that runs television commercials incessantly sums this up well in their advertising slogan when they declare: “Sometimes we’re waiting for God to make the next move, when God is saying it’s your turn.”

The story of Jacob wrestling all night long with the Almighty is a stark reminder to me that building a relationship with God is hard work... that it takes time, and effort, and sweat, and sometimes even a dislocated hip. But the blessing comes from the engagement. The gift comes from the effort. The new name, the new hope, the new possibilities, the new life comes in the morning only after a night spent rolling around on the ground struggling with God.

This morning’s gospel lesson continues that same theme. The disciples – that pitiful lot of followers – have spent the entire day watching Jesus touch person after person, bringing health, and wholeness, and holiness with every touch. And then, as the sun is setting on what I can only imagine must have been a pretty incredible day, the disciples start getting a little antsy. Who cares that Jesus has just been offering miracle after miracle in their presence? Now, all they care about is whether they’re going to get stuck footing the bill for all these folks to get a good meal at the end of the day. So, they implore Jesus, “Send the crowds away. Make them leave. Tell them to go somewhere else... anywhere else but here.” But then Jesus responds with what might be the six most important words in all of the gospels. He turns to his disciples and says, “You give them something to eat.”

The miracle of this story, at least to me, is not that the disciples were able to pull out five loaves of bread and two fish and feed five thousand men – not counting the women and children, who I assume probably got to eat as well. The miracle was that they figured out that the only way anything was going to get done was if Jesus and they worked together on the same side, partnering with one another in the hard work of changing the world. Just as Jacob had discovered that blessings come from engaging with God in the struggles of life, the disciples came to understand that blessings come about by sharing with God in the work, by bearing the load together, by realizing that both they and Jesus had a stake in that holy work... in the holy work of transforming of all creation.

Whether it is each of us as individuals, or whether it is all of us as a community of faith, there is a lot of hard work to be done right now. In either case, there is a temptation to fall into one of two traps. Either we have come to believe that if we just work harder, or longer, or more diligently, or more exhaustingly, we will somehow get “over the hump” and be able to coast down the back side of the hill for a while. Of course, if you’re like me, you come to discover that each time you make it around one bend on the ascent of that mountain, you come to discover that the road to the top has more and more bends in it that you didn’t even know were there.

The other choice is to throw up our hands, and say that the task is beyond our capabilities, and that all we can do is “give it up to God” or “let go and let God” – which is often just a euphemism for abdicating our own responsibility and walking away from the task before us.

But today's readings remind us that there is another way... a middle way... a reminder that God needs us just as much as we need God... that the adventure is richer, and filled with more possibilities, and more life-giving, and more meaningful, and more holy when it is a shared adventure. Jacob's wrestling with God that night by the River Jabbok started him on a whole new chapter of his relationship with God which led him on the most amazing journey. Jesus' command to his disciples "you give them something to eat", which was followed by Jesus blessing the food and giving it to the disciples to give it to the crowds, was a foreshadowing of what was to lay ahead, that life in community – by its very definition – meant that it called for them to be in unity with God and with one another to fulfil the unique work which God had in store for them.

What was true for Jacob... and what was true for the disciples... is just as true for us today. God has given us good and holy work to do. And God has assured us that we will never have to accomplish that labor alone. The work is there. The tasks lie before us. The promise is real. The time has come. "You give them something to eat."

Amen.