

They Need Not Go Away

Genesis 32: 22-31

Matthew 14: 13-21

My intention was to continue with the journey that we've been on. For the last several weeks we've been immersed in the stories of the Patriarchs. We've followed the narrative of text, and then the faith within the narrative. We've watched the drama of the stories, and we've offered commentary on the characters. We've been suspicious of the text but we haven't been skeptical of the text. We've been suspicious because of our moral sensibilities. But we've valued the scripture because of its faith claims. What this means is that scripture is capable of challenging our sense of right and wrong. And it does so in more ways than we often recognize, and in more ways than we care to address.

Being in moral disagreement with the text provides a different way of thinking about the text. It provides a different way of understanding the text. And it provides a different way of relating to the text. And very importantly, being in moral disagreement with the text opens new ways for us to relate to ourselves. In the twenty-first century, we will not accept somethings that were acceptable in Genesis. And in the twenty-first century, we will not regard as intolerable somethings that were not tolerated in biblical times. The text always challenges the community of faith. But the community of faith must be able to challenge the text. And to challenge the text by moral argument and on moral grounds.

Over the past couple of weeks we focused on the character of Jacob. We've found the character of the protagonist objectionable even as the text poses little objection. In the flow of the text the character flaws of Jacob are incidental. More important to the text is who he is in God's promise, and who he is in God's plan. But we've challenged the text because of the lack of objection within the text. Those omissions suggest something about God. And understanding God is important if we are to know who we are, and what constitutes our mission.

Today's Genesis text provides a resolution to the tension of Jacob's moral story. The moral arc was long but now it has caught up with him fully. Jacob wrestles with his fears, and he wrestles with his past, and he wrestles with an angel. And when the dawn breaks he gets a new name. When you read further into the text you discover that his family remains safe and that Jacob is able to return home. Oddly, the one who seems most evolved in this narrative is Esau. But the narrative has little interest in promoting him as such. Esau was the aggrieved party who showed the greater restraint, and the greater generosity, and the greater maturity. To my mind, he is a maligned character deserving of more regard and more appreciation.

If it had not been for today's gospel lesson all of today's message would have been based in Genesis. But the Matthean text is too inviting to be ignored. And I like titles that are straight from the text. In the verses preceding our lesson John the Baptist has been beheaded. And Jesus hears the news and seeks some alone time. He withdraws by himself in a boat but great crowds followed him. The scripture indicates that when he comes ashore elsewhere the crowds are waiting. It says that Jesus had compassion on them and healed their sick. Soon it is evening. The disciples want Jesus to send the crowds away because it's late and the area is deserted. They want them to leave and find food in the villages. Jesus says to the disciples "they need not go away;

you give them something to eat.” And they reply that they've got nothing but five loaves and two fish. And Jesus says “bring them here.”

This story suggests that Jesus had a few problems, and they were all staring at him. The first problem was location. The people of God were in a desolate place. The people followed him and in so doing left civilization behind. The second problem was time. The hour was getting late. Self-explanatory. The third problem was the food. There was no market nearby and no place to get something to eat. The disciples had some but it wasn't much: a few loaves and even less fish. But the biggest problem that Jesus had wasn't the location, or the time, or the little food they had. And it certainly wasn't the people of God. The biggest problem that Jesus had in this gospel lesson were his own disciples.

The disciples didn't want to be responsible for the people of God. They didn't believe the people would responsible for themselves. And they really didn't believe that God would be responsible for them. So Jesus was in disagreement with his disciples. Jesus had *moral disagreement*. He believed they were wrong in wanting the people to leave and fend for themselves. And he recognized that unwanted responsibility could be hidden in voiced concern.

Jesus had *moral hope*. He believed in the people who followed him, who listened to him, and who trusted in him. And he believed they would share what they had. He believed that they would share in ways that were gracious, and generous, and loving. And, Jesus had *moral faith*. He believed that God willed the healing, that God willed the protection, and that God willed the provision of God's own people. And that right where they were, they would not go unfed or un nourished. So Jesus blessed the five loaves and two fish. And however the bread was broken,

and however the fish was divided, and however both were multiplied, it was a miracle still the same.

Now if the Jesus lived with moral hope and moral faith, the disciples lived with something different. They lived with low expectations. And they were comfortable with those low expectations. We've said they didn't expect anything from the people. And that they didn't expect anything from themselves. And that they didn't expect anything from God. But they seemed not to have expected anything from Jesus either. And because they didn't expect anything they weren't willing to do anything, or to believe anything. So the disciples expected nothing and they wanted to offer nothing. And so their low expectations about everything were being self-fulfilled.

But there's more. Jesus encountered another problem with his disciples. The problem wasn't just that the disciples had low expectations. That's obvious. What's less obvious about the disciples was that they had low concern. As we said earlier: sometimes the avoidance of responsibility is hidden in concern. The disciples were concerned about the remoteness of the area. It was too desolate and too removed. In other words, there was a problem with the neighborhood. But for the disciples, the solution was still the same: just send them away. The disciples had a concern but it was focused more on the neighborhood and less on the people. And as long as they were more concerned about neighborhood and less concerned about the people, they didn't have to do anything for them *right where they were*.

Now if Jesus had been in agreement with his disciples we wouldn't have read about this miracle. And if Jesus had taken a vote on the matter we wouldn't have heard about it either. In fact, the only reason this story is in scripture is because Jesus disagreed with his disciples and overruled

them. He then told his disciples what to do, which was the opposite of what they intended to do. If you're paying attention to the text, you realize Jesus wasn't in agreement with his disciples on anything: not about the people, not about the food, not about the neighborhood, not about God, and not about himself. In this story, Jesus wasn't in agreement with any of them on anything. This was not the first moment like this, and it wasn't going to be the last.

So Jesus was willing to stand alone among his disciples on the behalf of God's people, and on the behalf of God's concern. He was connected to the people, and he had compassion for the people, and he took action for the people. And his faith in God's people was justified by his faith in God.

Jesus imagined a moment of community. A moment where the possessed resources of God's people were shared with God's people who were dispossessed. This understanding of the miraculous is disturbing to some folks. So disturbing that given a choice, some folks prefer the miracle of God creating bread and fish out of thin air. They forget that when Jesus turned the water into wine he started with water.

But in faith all miracles have traces of mystery; there is always an invisible presence, a hidden hand, a still small voice, or a silent companion. And the feeding of over five thousand is no exception. But love is also an action of intentionality. And Jesus intentionally loved the people. And the people of God returned that love. The beautiful thing about love is that it can be returned from people and places you never expected. We never know where a smile or hug will come from. And we don't always know who will need one the most. The patient thing about love is that its got all the time in the world, even if at any given moment we do not. That means its got plenty of time to work on us, and thank God. Because we've all got room to grow as time passes by.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Robert Edwards