

“Banquets, Blessing, and Brokenness”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14:13-21

One week after the funeral for my mom, my sister-in-law got married. My mom had actually gone shopping with me to pick out the dress I would wear to that wedding, just 2 weeks before; it was our last shopping trip. Now, I adore the person my sister-in-law married, and was thrilled that she was joining our family. But what a whiplash of emotion it was for me, to have such a banquet of blessing, in the midst of my bereavement and brokenness.

Maybe that's what Jesus felt like when he gathered with people on the shore, where thousands had followed them, and they were hungry. You see, our lectionary text doesn't cover it, but just before this story from Matthew we hear this morning, earlier in the same chapter, we are told that John the Baptist— John, who had been Jesus' cousin just a few months apart, who also grew to become the prophet who had prepared the way for Jesus' coming, and who had even baptized Jesus himself— had been killed by beheading in Herod's palace. You see, the daughter of Herodias gave such a pleasing dance at Herod's birthday banquet, that King Herod promised in front of all the gathered dignitaries that the girl could have whatever she wished. Her mother, Herodias, did not like that John the Baptist had dared to criticize the incestuous love triangle Herodias shared with her husband Philip and his brother, Herod. So she whispered into her daughter's ear, “ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter!” The daughter asked as her mother commanded, and— not to lose face by not following through with an oath he made in front of his guests, Herod did as he was asked. John— who had already been imprisoned— was beheaded and his head was brought in on a covered platter, which was presented to the girl, who then brought it to her mother.

It was a feast that had turned disastrous. Jesus needed time to struggle with this loss, and perhaps as well what this would mean for his own ministry. If John could be killed, what would happen with Jesus? So, Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place.

This is before mobile phones, texting, or emails, the days when a pastor can be found just about anywhere, even on a day off or vacation. But even without all that, the crowds tracked Jesus down and followed him— in hordes. This brokenhearted man spent the afternoon healing the sick and sharing compassion with them. As night was upon them, his disciples urged Jesus to send the people home— he needed the rest and besides, there was no food, and the people would be hungry.

I'm clearly not Jesus. I know my human limits— and I see Jesus at the edge of his. I want Jesus to send everyone home. I want him to get a sabbatical. I want him to have time to sort through his thoughts, talk to his therapist, take long walks, ponder the lilies in the field, cry angry tears,

yell at God, fall into the arms of a comforting friend, practice mindfulness, sort through all his memories of John and what they shared, be intentional about his breathing, and if *that* fails, I want him to binge-watch Netflix until his mind temporarily numbs from the pain of all he has lost.

Clearly, I am not Jesus. But I do remember that what kept me from being marooned on the island of despair is that my child, who was just one, needed me for her ordinary, daily rhythms: feeding, washing, comforting, playing, nursing. Her rhythms helped give me rhythm. Maybe it was the same with Jesus: maybe the crowd and its hunger gave him the rhythms to follow, even when his own heart was too broken to provide its own rhythm.

What Jesus tells the disciples is to gather whatever food they can find so that the crowd can eat. Together they came up with 5 loaves of bread, and two fish. This is one of the rare stories that show up in all four gospels, and in the Gospel According to John, it's a boy who provides the barley loaves and fish. Whoever donated these items, when they pass through Jesus' hands they suddenly become enough food for thousands of people.

I am reminded of a short story within a book I am currently reading, *The Covenant of Water*, by Abraham Verghese. It takes place in Kerala, the same state of India where our church member Ammal Varky is from. It's 1964, and a Christian convention occurs. The Reverend Billy Graham had been expected, but a last-minute substitute had arrived instead. Quickly they arrange a translator for this Arkansas preacher. The preacher begins with a joke. The translator studies the crowd, and then explains in Malayalam, "This Reverend has just cracked a joke. To tell you the truth, I was so surprised I can't give you the details. Who expects a joke at the Maramon Convention. Let me just say it involved a dog, an old lady, a bishop, and a handbag..." this got a few giggles from the women's section, and then the children, too. The translator continued, "The joke isn't as funny as the reverend thinks. Besides, do any old ladies in Kerala carry handbags?... but please, let's not disappoint a guest from far, far away. Blessed are those who laugh at a visitor's jokes."

The congregation— a multitude— laughs. The preacher is encouraged, and goes on:

"My brothers and sisters, I stand before you as a sinner. I stand before you as an adulterer. A fornicator... Friends, I'm not one to mince my words. A fornicator, I say, a man who slept with every loose woman and some who weren't till I pried them loose. That's who I was. The number of people I need to make amends to, the number of people I led astray," the preacher says, "extends from this side of the crowd to that one."

The translator feels his stomach drop like the time he had dysentery. If he speaks those words, won't everyone think *he* is the adulterer, *he* is the fornicator? While he studies the crowd, he notices that someone in the women's section has keeled over, overcome by the humidity. He notices that outside the tent, it appears a child is having a convulsion. So instead, the translator tells the crowds:

“When I look from that side of the river to this side of the river, I think of all the people here in this beautiful land who suffer from rare illness, or cancer, or need heart surgery, and have nowhere to go...Well it troubles me, and I must speak openly about it.”

The preacher continues: “I broke my mother’s heart when I lay in carnal knowledge with my own nanny!” The reverend says, clutching his chest. “An innocent country woman, I snuggled at her breast, and yet at thirteen I took advantage of her.”

Barely waiting for the reverend to continue, the translator clutched his own chest, saying, “If some child is born with a hole in its heart like our Papi’s little child and needs an operation, where can they go?” He’s invented Papi and child, but it’s in service of the Lord. The reinterpretation of the translation continues until people are pulling colorful bills out of their wallets and saris and each one is giving more than ever could have been imagined, until the impoverished region that had neither hospital nor clinic was able to build both.<sup>1</sup>

Some suggest that the real miracle of the loaves and fishes is that when onlookers saw someone share what little food they had, each one then offered from their robes the small bits they had, and when pooled together, it became a great banquet. I cannot be sure what exactly happened, or how it happened, except to say that that day mirrored the generous abundance of the shalom of God.

And yet, most of us are struggling, somewhere between blessing and brokenness. We each can hopefully see ways that— call it blessing, or call it privilege— we have been touched with good things in life. But we also realize that being known, and even being blessed, by God doesn’t mean that life will be easy. It doesn’t mean that we will never be the a\*\*hole. It doesn’t mean our hearts won’t be broken.

There is something about that story of the Indian translator intentionally interpreting the American preacher— for a much better outcome— that reminds me of Jacob, the trickster. There is a thread on Reddit, called AITA? It stands for “Am I the a\*\*hole?” and it is for the frustrated moral philosopher in messy human relationships. People write in with their situations, to get validation from an unknown audience, about whether they or the other person was the jerk in their stories. Yes, Jacob, you *were* the a\*\*hole.

But even Jacob, who had grabbed the blessing and birthright meant for his brother Esau, and from that inheritance accumulated even greater wealth, could not settle into a life of ease. He cried out to God, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant. He feared that his twin brother would kill him, and knew that it would probably be justified. And still, he sought reconciliation. He sent ahead of himself a big slice of his wealth— hundreds of goats and ewes, plus camels, cows, colts, bulls, and donkeys, as a peace offering to Esau. He sent his wives and children ahead of him. And Jacob slept alone by the river Jabbok.

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<sup>1</sup> This story is relayed in Chapter 60 of *Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese.

Instead of sleep, Jacob spent the whole night wrestling with an angel until he received a blessing. We can wonder why he wrestled: was he wrestling against himself? His choices that defrauded his brother? Was it against the twin he had already supplanted? Was his struggle truly between just him and God?

Rachel Wren calls this wrestling with God “perhaps the best description of the life of faith in the entire bible.” Perhaps that is because we are always struggling somewhere in that line between blessing, and brokenness.

And yet, it is in that place that Jesus sets a banquet for us. It is not the banquet of oppression and violence. That is the banquet Herod hosts. It is a generous banquet, the banquet that says, even in the remotest of places, I will feed you. Yes, even *if* you are the a\*\*hole, I will feed you. Even when you think, *I have nothing left to give*, in terms of compassion, attention, or presence, there is still more. I will feed you, and you will become something else— something more than you can be without what I offer.