

Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 17:1-7, 16
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
St Barnabas Bainbridge Island
The Reverend Karen Haig
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God's Generosity

In our baptismal rite, there is an old-fashioned saying that I love. It isn't used by most priests I know, because the directions in the prayer book simply say that each baptismal candidate is presented by name. When a little one is placed in my arms to be baptized, I say to the parents: "Name this child..." It is a beautiful moment, every single time. Loving parents, gazing upon their child most often speak their name in something close to a whisper, as if what they are saying is a prayer. Our names come from somewhere and they matter. Whether we have a long-established family name that hearkens back generations, or a name made up, never before spoken, a name given for a brand new fresh start, names matter. In the book of Genesis, there is a lot about names. Children are named for the circumstances of their birth. Take Jacob – his name is interpreted as either "heel or trickster or over-reacher or supplanter,"¹ all characteristics we've seen him live out, and in ways that aren't so pretty. But today, Jacob gets a new name. Ah, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

My favorite interpretation of Jacob's name is "trickster," a quality he lives up to over and over again. From tricking his brother into giving up his birthright with little more than a pot of lentil stew, to tricking his father into giving him the family blessing by wearing goatskins so he'd seem to be his brother, Jacob was a fine trickster. But his deceits caught up with him, and he ran away from his family without so much as a walking stick. Asleep in the wilderness he had a dream of God's presence with him everywhere. We thought maybe he'd make a new start after that dream, but he didn't. He continued to live up to his name even though he'd been on the receiving end of some pretty crafty trickery himself. Do you remember? It's not lost on me that Jacob pretended to be the first born Esau in order to get the blessing he wanted so badly, and that the first born Leah pretended to be Rachel so she would have her birthright of being the first to marry. Of course it was all Leah's father Laban's doing, but in that bit of the story, it seems perhaps Jacob's met his trickster match.

It's an amazing story, isn't it? A lot has happened since we left off last Sunday – there's a lot more trickery that goes on between Jacob and Laban, but when Jacob heard the Lord saying '*Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you,*' Genesis 31:3 he knew it was time to go. So he gathered up his wives and his many, many children – we won't go there – and headed back to his homeland and back to his brother Esau. Seeing Esau again was a daunting prospect for Jacob, and when he heard that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men, he sent servants with goats and bulls and rams and cows and all manner of livestock ahead

¹ ¹Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation*. Philadelphia: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 268.

of him as gifts to appease his brother. Then he sent his family away, across the river Jabbock, a name that just happens to come from the word “wrestle.” All alone, Jacob spent the night in the camp, and that’s where we pick up today. Jacob is terrified of meeting up with Esau and when he lay down to sleep that night, he had another big dream.

It might have seemed like it was his brother Esau who had come to wrestle him in his dream. Some interpret the “man” as an angel. We don’t have a lot of information other than the wrestling went on all night long. When “the man” sees that he cannot prevail, he does something that puts Jacob’s leg out of joint, but still Jacob won’t let go. “Give me a blessing” he demanded. It’s not what I would have expected here, but Jacob seems to have been after blessings since the moment he was born. Rather than the requested blessing, Jacob gets a question. “What is your name?” the wrestler asks him. And in speaking his name, Jacob the trickster, the heel, the over-reacher, the supplanter admits to God the nature of his own character.

It’s quite a moment, if you think about it. Jacob, who has lived his life lying and cheating and tricking people out of what is their own, has just admitted all that by speaking his name. And what does the God of everything do with that admission? The same thing God has done all along with this not-so-stellar human Jacob. God blesses him and God gives him a new name – not the name of a liar and a cheat, but a name worthy of what he is to become, Israel. Israel, the one who wrestles with God and man and who prevails. It was a generous name, because surely Jacob hadn’t prevailed and he had the wounds to prove it. But in his gratitude, Israel named the place where he wrestled Peniel, which means “the face of God.” Israel had indeed seen the face of God and it changed him. Instead of running or hiding or playing more tricks, Israel went to meet his brother face to face. And after prostrating himself in front of Esau, after his entire family bowed to honor Esau, Esau threw his arms around his brother and wept. And Israel – who had been profoundly changed, looked at his brother and said *“truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”* Genesis 33:10

This is a story about Jacob and Esau, and Laban and Rachel and Leah, about their maids and their children... but mostly it’s a story about God. It’s a story about the generosity of a God who never stops loving us, never gives up on us no matter what we do or don’t do. This is a story about God’s character and about what God can do whether we offer just a little bit of willingness, an all-night wrestling match, or a couple of fish and 5 loaves of bread.

Jesus shows that same character in the story of the feeding of the multitudes, and long before he ever got to the loaves and the fishes. The story begins: *“When Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”* Matthew 13:14 Do you know what Jesus had heard? It was the news of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. King Herod was having a huge party and when his niece’s dancing made him so deliriously happy that he promised her anything she wanted, well, she demanded John’s head on a silver platter. You see Herod had been having an affair with her mother, who just happened to be married to Herod’s brother. John the Baptist, John the prophet was quite outspoken about the folly of such behavior. Herod, obsessed with his dancing niece, was unable to control himself and refused to be seen as someone who would

go back on his word, and so he had John's head brought to this pleasing dancer, who promptly gave it to her mother.

"When Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself..." John the Baptist, the one who had baptized him and prepared the way for him had died, and a very heartbroken Jesus just wanted to get away. So he stepped into a boat and decided to row to a calm, quiet, place where he could be alone. I like to think about him having some time to himself in that boat –slowly rowing away from the deep sadness of his cousin's death, and just for a little while, taking respite in the quietness of the lake. Oars silently dipping down into the water, then up and out, water droplets glinting in the sunlight as they dripped softly back into the lake. But when Jesus looked up, he saw that he was surely not in a quiet and deserted place. Thousands of people had followed him, wanting him cure to their sicknesses. So Jesus, being Jesus, gave up the idea of a little quiet time to grieve and pray, and rowed back to shore to care for the people who had followed him. That kind of compassion is a miracle. Setting his own sadness aside, he cared for the ones who had come to be with him. And when it was time to eat, he saw that they were fed. Thousands of them.

Do you remember what Jesus said when the disciples suggested it was time for everyone to go into the village and get something to eat? He said "You give them something to eat." He didn't say "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." He said YOU give them something to eat. And in doing that, Jesus made a miracle we don't always recognize. The disciples knew that Jesus could take care of food problem. They'd heard him tell that parable of the tiny mustard seed growing into the giant bush. But Jesus didn't take care of the problem the way they thought he would. Instead, he asked them to bring what food they had. Then he took the fish and the bread they brought him, blessed it, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and they gave it to others who gave it to others who gave it to others until all were satisfied and there was much left over. Yes, there is the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. But equally wonderful is the fact that Jesus gave the disciples the responsibility of feeding those people and that's what they did.

This too is a story about God's generous character. Yes there is the generosity that gives up personal need to help others, the generosity of healing, the generosity of feeding all those people. But this is also a story about the generosity of a God who calls us to come alongside and to take an active part in the miraculous healing of the world. This is a story that tells us who Jesus is AND a story that tells us who we are too. We are co-creators with God, and whatever little we think we have, in God's hands, becomes utter abundance. It doesn't matter that we feel like we don't have enough, that we aren't equipped to do the work that needs doing in the world. What matters is that we have a God who insists that we come alongside God and offer what we can and then watch and wonder as the miracles unfold. Amen.