
Don't Let Go Before Your Blessings

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In the name of God, our Maker, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

In seminary one of our professors cautioned us about doing what I'm about to do: preaching from your own life story as an example of the gospel message. She said that it can be very powerful, but that there is an obvious challenge that is equally powerful, even seductive. The preacher must ask herself, she said, "'How do I insure that the focus stays on the gospel and does not shift onto me?' Or more precisely she said, "'How does my personal story become an incarnation of God's bigger story? How does telling a story from my life experience become a vehicle for each listener hearing God's story in one's own and each other's life experiences?'

Well, in order to keep faith with my teacher I'm going to try an experiment with you'"a kind of pastoral counseling experiment. If you happen to refer to my story from today in future conversations I'm going to try to respond by inviting you to add your own story too'"or some other that you know, as a case of the same gospel story becoming incarnate somewhere else. And furthermore I invite you to do the same with others. When attention becomes fixated on your story to the exclusion of others'"particularly to the exclusion of God's mega-story of "'good news' and Easter resurrection through our Lord Jesus Christ, I exhort you to invite your listeners to tack back to that bigger story; the God-story that incorporates and transfigures our individual and even our collective, corporate stories.

To shift from theology to psychology, this is a question about narcissism, our species-wide narcissism. My ordination brother, Bill Harkins, occasionally reminds us of this personality challenge for all of us. It is enshrined in the classical myth of Narcissus. Narcissus was the young man who was so in love with his own image that he died of starvation while gazing on his reflection by the side of a pool. "'Narcissism,' therefore, is that seductive attraction to our own person that keeps us fixated on ourselves. As in the myth of Narcissus, it becomes pathological, even fatal when we can't let go of ourselves enough to be able to live a real life, in the real world, where there are other sources of nourishment and nurture and other resources for gratification and fulfillment'"resources like other persons and, indeed, whole communities of persons.

We must let go of ourselves, therefore, in order to lay hold of others'"other sources of nourishment, other people to love and adore, and other resources for life and fulfillment besides ourselves. I'm reminded here of a colleague's book, which I highly commend to you by the way, called, *The Ethics of Ambition*, by former Emory professor Brian Mahan. The subtitle is what I want you to remember: "Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose."

Isn't that ironic? Imagine: "Forgetting ourselves on purpose." Who would ever want to do that! Well, imagine that you find yourself sitting next to a Narcissus one day, and that you are somehow able get their attention long enough to perform an intervention. In that situation you might lean over and say something like, "'Please, for dear life's sake, forget yourself on purpose my friend. Choose life instead of yourself, and discover that you will get yourself back too'"but yourself in community with me and with so many others.'

In this connection I'm always reminded, when the subject of self-absorption comes up, of a series of jokes that I just can't

resist sharing with you right now. (If you've heard me tell them before I hope they bear repeating. And I hope you'll agree that they really do connect with today's gospel message.) The first one I heard in a 12-Step meeting one day, where people are recovering from addiction and are still working on issues of self-esteem. "I may not be much," I heard one speaker say, "I may not be much, but I'm all I really think about!"

Then there's the birthday card that I received one year and that said on the cover, "So it's your birthday, huh?" And when I opened it up to the inside it read: "It's always got to be about you, doesn't it?" Well, of course it's got to be about me!" I was tempted to think defensively before I got the joke!" It's my birthday, isn't it! But when I caught myself I was able to laugh with the joke and not be just the butt of the joke. To be the butt of the joke is to act like everyday is my birthday!" you know, when everyday and all day long I act like everything has "'always got to be about me,' right? Finally there's that great line that I've heard attributed to the comedian, Bette Midler: "Enough about me. Tell me more. What do you think about me!"

With this introduction I want to tell you something about me that I want to be about more than just me, but also about you!" and also about the gospel for today. It's a gospel about letting of ourselves long enough to not let go of something more important than ourselves. But in order to hear this gospel!" as Jesus has been telling us in his parables for the last few weeks, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" "in order to hear today's gospel we need to begin with today's Old Testament story from Genesis. It's the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel!" or wrestling with an angelic man if you prefer to read the text literally. The old slave spiritual called it, "Wrestlin' Jacob," and I hope I have a chance to share some of the song lyrics with you before I'm through.

But first, here's the story.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

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.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

... 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."

... And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. (Gen. 32.24-26, 28-31)

Now here!" if we have learned anything from the parables that Jesus has taught us in recent weeks!" here is where "'anyone with ears to hear listens;' listen, that is, for the parallels or the allegories in your own life story. In my life story I hear the parallel in my own wrestling with the angel of death; the "'death angel,' as he was almost affectionately called in the popular TV series, "Touched By an Angel." Already I wonder, how have you been "'touched by an angel!" particularly the angel of death? But back to my story. In December of 1997 I was touched a second time in life by the death angel, with the loss of my beloved Pakistani wife, Jane Najmuddin. She left that morning for work and during the course of the work-day suffered a heart attack and so never came home.

All that next year, from December '97 throughout 1998, I wrestled with the death angel just like "'Wrestling Jacob' in today's story. Wounded as we all are by death, I nonetheless demanded a blessing. And while ever since I have been "'limping' from that wound, I also have the blessing that I received by "'prevailing with God and with humans.' And the blessing is this: this blessing that we hear about in today's gospel, the blessing of community, of not letting-go of community, of laying hold of myself in community, of persisting in this community and in so many others.

The disciples were at risk of letting-go of community in today's gospel story, weren't they?

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."

Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (Mt. 12.15-16)

"They need not go away; you give them something to eat." But Lord, my wife has died and I want to be left alone, as the scripture says, to sit "'in sackcloth and ashes.' Send people away so they can get what they need from someone else.' Instead he said what we hear him say again and again, "'Let anyone with ears to hear, listen.' Thee, he said to me: "'They need not

go away; you give them what they need for nourishment and nurture, gratification and fulfillment, life and vitality.'

"No, Lord,' I groaned with a mourner's attitude of justified isolation, "but I don't have enough resource left for myself even. How can I be a conduit for these others when I need so much just for me?' And of course I heard him say, in the words of that famous prayerbook prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

. . . it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 833

Now what can any committed Christian say to that? Rather, to quote St. Paul, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision' (Acts 26.19). So I have persisted in this community and in others where we have broken the bread of life to each other, and have eaten together and been filled. I have experienced the reality of today's gospel, therefore, which is a forecast of our holy eucharist at this altar every week. And our holy eucharist, in turn, is a foretaste of that heavenly banquet that we await with our Lord at the end of time. All of that is telegraphed in those two verses of today's gospel:

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.

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. (Mt. 14.19-20)

Now, enough about me! What do you think about me? No, just kidding! That was my joke, remember? I hope you got it! Really, enough about me; how about you? How about the incarnation of these scriptures in your own life story and experiences? Now, as your priest or minister I just happen to know a few of your stories out there. So let's hear it. What angels""or angelic men or angelic women""have you been wrestling with in life?

And where have you been challenged to let go of yourself so you could lay hold of that angel instead? And where have you prevailed with God and with humans and laid claim to a blessing, even at the cost of limping thereafter? And what kind of blessings have you received in this community and in others, where you have not let us go but have yourself given us what we need for nourishment and nurture, gratification and fulfillment, life and vitality?

Come on now! Don't all speak at once! I'm waiting to hear! . . .

Okay, relax, just kidding again. We can't all speak at once, can we? Or, can we? Maybe that's part of what speaking-in-tongues is partly about. Everyone speaking at once about the power of the gospel in their lives. The whole church extemporizing together the mighty acts of God in our lives. You yourself overflowing with testimony about Old Testament stories and gospel stories all becoming real and true in your life and stories.

The old slave spiritual says it this way:
O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';
I will not let thee go!

O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';
He will not let me go!

O, I hold my brother with a tremblin' hand
I would not let him go!

I hold my sister with a tremblin' hand;
I would not let her go!

O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb,
He would not let him go!

O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb;

The Lord will bless my soul. [<http://way.net/SoulsOfBlackFolk/14WrestlingJacob.html>]

Yes, we may be "'hanging from a trembling limb' but may we "'not let each other go until the Lord blesses our souls.'

So, my sisters and brothers, on that closing note I invite you to receive this benediction:

The Lord be with you . . .

Let us pray:

May the Lord bless us in this community and everywhere, as we "'prevail with God and with humans' in not letting each other go . . .

In the name of God, our Maker, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

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