

LIMITED AND ABUNDANT
Genesis 32: 22-32; Matthew 14: 13-21
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 6, 2023
by Pat Berger

Our Gospel reading for today is one of those where it is easy to get caught up in the details and miss the point of the whole. Jesus went away to a place by himself -- and 5000 men showed up, not to mention the women and children? It got to be about dinner time, and the disciples suggested that Jesus send the folks home -- and Jesus told the disciples to feed them? They came up with five loaves of bread and two fish -- and all 5000 men, plus women, and plus children were fed, and 12 baskets of leftovers were gathered?

Jesus had been teaching the disciples about their God, the God Who Keeps on Caring. That God is the same one about whom Jacob learned in today's verses from Genesis that Gina read for us. Jacob, whose name means Heel and who had been acting like one for most of his life, was about to meet with his brother Esau, who we remember Jacob had tricked out of his birthright and their father's blessing. Jacob may have been a heel, AND he had some smarts. He sent significant gifts in advance to Esau -- many animals and slaves -- and then, as our reading begins, he sends his wives and maids and children and all of his belongings; maybe if Esau isn't impressed with the gifts, at least he would be kind in front of the women and children. While Jacob waited, he ended up in a wrestling match with a man -- or, as it turns out, with our God Who Keeps on Caring. God had plans for Jacob, and so God would change Jacob's name. One whose name is Israel, which means "striving with God and prevailing" might accomplish a fair amount more for the kingdom than one whose name is "heel."

The disciples knew Jacob or Israel's story, and they were learning the story that was Jesus. We all know enough of what Jesus could do and did regularly that we know that he could have made it so that all of those people -- men, women and children -- felt full without ever having been fed. Jesus could have done that. And we remember

way back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was tempted in the desert, tempted to turn stones into bread in order to feed the hungry; he could have done that on this day.

Instead, he took bread -- the fish seem to disappear -- he took bread, and broke and blessed it and gave it to the people -- sound familiar? He did what we read about him doing on many occasions and what the church has done regularly throughout these many years and what we will do shortly: he took bread and broke it and blessed it and gave it, and all were filled. And the disciples did as our deacons will do: they gathered that that was left over.

It could be that this is a miracle story, but it isn't written that way by the one who wrote the Gospel according to Matthew. Think of other miracle stories. Here, we don't read of people being amazed; no one asks, who is this?; there is no report of new believers; and we aren't told that Jesus' fame spread throughout the region. No, none of that is in this account. What we have is a story of compassion, a story of feeding the hungry -- a story that has been primary in the church ever since. As one commentator reminds us, "Jesus said the question, 'what did you do in the face of human hunger?' would be on the final exam." We haven't done enough, and we don't do it often enough - - AND followers of Jesus always, always respond in the face of hungry men and women and children. Whether long-term efforts, like food banks here in this area, or food drives that groups do, or the peanut butter that is multiplying in our Fellowship Hall, or emergency relief like the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program, our volunteer hours and our offering dollars, and those of others like us, work at this facet of being church and being followers of whom Jesus would be proud. Apparently, by the time the writer of the Gospel of Matthew recorded this story, feeding was enough a part of what the church did that it was not thought to be miracle; it was the norm. It was replayed, as we will in a few moments, every time the church gathered at the Table. May it ever be so.

Let us pray.