

Wrestling With Blessing

Genesis 32: 22-31 & Matthew 14:13-21

Rev. Jo Ramsey ~ August 3, 2014

Anyone who emails with me knows that I have a particular way of signing my notes. Just before my name, I always close with one word. "Blessings." For me, it's a prayer, a way of asking God to bless the person with who I am corresponding and the work we share between us.



For many of us, blessings are something we say before a meal. "God is Great. God is Good. So we thank him for our food," or "Bless these gifts which we are about to receive."

Dinner blessings give us just the briefest moment to catch our breathe, to ask God to bless our food, that it might nourish and strengthen us. Grace also reminds us of the blessings we enjoy --- food on our table, family gathered around, peace in our home. And finally, saying Grace helps us to remember those who do not enjoy such bounty.

Jesus prayed before meals too. The feeding of the 5000 is just one gigantic dinner, really. In today's lesson, Jesus disciples come to him at the end of a long day, a day that Jesus had set aside to be alone. In the previous passage, Jesus had learned that John the Baptist has been brutally killed. John---his forerunner, baptizer, proclaimer and cousin is gone. This must have been a painful watershed moment for Jesus. What will happen now? What does this mean for the unfolding of God's plan?



Jesus goes off by himself to pray, but the crowds follow him and press upon him. Even in his grief, Jesus is moved by their need and he reaches out with compassion. But, now evening has arrived. Everyone is hungry, hot and tired. The disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the famished crowds to go and find food.

Jesus has already given so much, yet when asked again, he doesn't hesitate. God has provided all day long, and God will provide now. Jesus gathers the meager



provisions the disciples have collected and blesses them. He completely, implicitly trusts in God's power to multiply the blessings despite the odds. He lifts the situation into God's hands and receives God's outpouring of abundance. On that day, God blessed thousands of people with sustenance for soul and body.

God is in the business of blessing. He wants to bless us. He wants to enrich our lives in every way. Think for a minute of the blessings God gives us... Children, loving relationships, meaningful work and a place to call home, prosperity, good looks, good health and peace of mind. These are the things we want, the things we hope for, the things we ask for. Over and over, we go to God and ask for blessing. We even ask God to bless our animals, and soon our children and their backpacks. We want to be blessed.



Now the Irish are famous for their blessings. Do we have an Irish among us? Scotch-Irish? They're always in pursuit of good fortune and blessing. They kiss the Blarney Stone, search for four leaf clovers, seek the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The ancient Irish Journey Blessing is perhaps the most familiar of all:

*May the road rise to meet you.
 May the wind be always at your back.
 May the sun shine warm upon your face.
 The rains fall soft upon your field, and until we meet again,
 may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

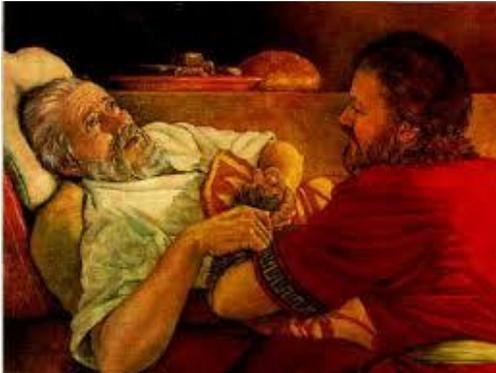
But just like those tricky leprechauns, not every Irish blessing is what it seems. Some have a bit of mischief.

How about this one?!

*May those that love us, love us.
 And those that don't love us,
 May God turn their hearts.
 And if He doesn't turn their hearts,
 May He turn their ankles
 So we will know them by their limping.*



This Irish blessing sounds more like an Irish curse! In other words, may God bless our enemy with an injury, a limp, so we can recognize him before he gets to us to cause trouble! Sounds familiar! That's just the kind of blessing Jacob receives in our Genesis passage this morning!



Jacob is a man well-acquainted with blessings – blessings that have become curses, and curses that become blessings. You might remember that Jacob stole his father's blessing from his twin brother, Esau. He did so by trickery and deceit, by covering his body with an animal skin so his father would think he was Esau. (Evidently, Esau was one hairy guy!)

As you can imagine, the twin brothers' relationship is forever ruptured. Many years pass, and Jacob goes on to enjoy the blessings of wives and children, animals and property. And yet, Jacob is moved to reconcile with Esau. As we read this morning, Jacob has arrived at the river which stands between him and Esau. He sends his family and entourage on ahead, understanding he needs this night alone before facing Esau to ask for forgiveness.

It is then that a man sets upon him, an angel perhaps, or God. The text is unclear. But, we know that after a night of wrestling, Jacob believes he has seen God face-to-face. He has struggled with the guilt and fear of his broken past, and has prevailed. Finally, Jacob has 'earned' his blessing. He claims it, and receives a new name, as well. Jacob will be called Israel, father of the 12 tribes. He has grappled with his past, and in the process, discovered his true identity in God.



Jacob is limping as the sun rises. But this is no turned ankle, it's an injured hip. Jacob's limping is a sign that he has wrestled with God. It's a wound that will remind him of a sleepless night and a blessed sunrise. He has been blessed, and this time, it's legitimate!



How many of us can remember a time we found ourselves awake at night? Restless, perhaps coming to terms with something from our past... Figuring out how to move forward...Facing questions about the future...wondering what kind of blessing God has in store for us.

Unfortunately, we don't all get the blessings of prosperity and progeny like Jacob. Instead, God's blessings often come to us in difficulties, through hard times, by way of challenges that may seem more than we can bear. Oscar Wilde once said, "What seems to us as bitter trials, are often blessings in disguise."



- ~A job loss that leads to a more fulfilling vocation,
- ~A health crisis that gave you a new appreciation for life,
- ~A relationship strain that helps you set new priorities.

I saw a poster this week that read, "Ok God, I'm ready for some blessings that aren't in disguise." Of course, not every difficult season, not every suffering is sent from above, but no matter what, we can trust that God will use it all for good.



In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced his own long and lonely night. Like Jacob, he wrestles with God, struggling to accept and claim his calling. Three times he asks that God might take this cup pass away. (Remember, Jesus has just told Peter that he will deny him three times before the cock crows.)

As Jesus wrestles, an angel comes and ministers to him. Then dawn begins to spread over the garden and Jesus knows what he must do. He sets his face to the cross. He knows he has blessed his final meal... the bread of life, the cup of salvation, and understands that God will multiply that blessing through his sacrifice. His curse has become our blessing---He has taken upon himself the curse of sin and death and showered us with grace and new life.



As we gather now at this table to celebrate the blessing of redemption, I invite you to consider your blessings. What blessings do you have and



what blessings are you hoping for? What is God asking you to wrestle with? Do you have a relationship to restore or a calling to claim? How might God use a difficulty you are facing to open you, to shape you? What new thing does God want to do in your life? What blessing is God waiting to give you?

Listen with me, as we prepare our hearts, to a song by Laura Story called, "**Blessings.**"
(Enter <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKPeoPiK9XE> into your browser to listen.)



We pray for blessings, we pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering
And all the while, You hear each spoken need
Yet love us way too much to give us lesser things



**'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?**



We pray for wisdom, Your voice to hear
We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near



We doubt your goodness, we doubt your love
As if every promise from Your word is not enough
And all the while, You hear each desperate plea
And long that we'd have faith to believe



**'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?/
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?**



When friends betray us
When darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart
That this is not, this is not our home...It's not our home



*'Cause what if your blessings
come through rain drops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
What if a thousand sleepless nights
are what it takes to know You're near?
What if my greatest disappointments
or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst
this world can't satisfy?*

*What if trials of this life...
the rain, the storms, the hardest nights...
Are your mercies in disguise?*



In the name of the Father,
& the Son,
& the Holy Spirit,
Amen.