

7 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13 – Year A – August 3, 2011 Homily
Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17: 1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21
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Most of us use the common phrase, “Bless you!” as a contraction of “God bless you!” after someone sneezes. No one really knows the origins of this tradition, but several possibilities exist. Wikipedia notes that the earliest dates for this practice, which go as far back as 77 A.D., have no specific explanations. They also tell us that the custom may actually have begun as a blessing by Pope Gregory I during an outbreak of bubonic plague in 590 A.D. Then there’s another belief that a sneeze was a sign that God would answer our prayers, and so the blessing was to acknowledge that good fortune coming our way. It’s quite amazing how these things get started, and just become traditions. One thing is for sure; we all appreciate a blessing, whether it’s given in response to a sneeze, or all the things in our lives that we count as blessings from God.

In the continuing story of Jacob found in the Book of Genesis it’s pretty clear that Jacob will do almost anything, including deceiving his own father, in order to receive a blessing. We can only imagine why he was so desperate as to steal the blessing of his brother, Esau. However, we do know that in ancient Biblical tradition, a blessing spoken was considered to be God’s word. In tonight’s reading, Jacob wrestles all night with a strange man, and finally as daybreak comes, and the man asks to be released, Jacob demands a blessing. There’s a couple of observations to note. The first is that despite Jacob’s demand, the man makes him wait for the blessing, just like Jacob had to wait for Rachel. The second is that despite Jacob’s obvious physical strength and stamina, he once again, seeks the reassurance of God’s blessing. In other words, despite his physical prowess, and courage in wrestling with the unknown antagonist, Jacob’s demand speaks volumes about his lack of confidence, and peace of mind that God is with him. In some ways, Jacob reminds us of a young Martin Luther, who also wrestled mightily in his relationship with God. It’s written that “[Luther] was to conclude, with the counseling of his confessor, that God is not an arbitrary judge but someone who desires the salvation of all people. Salvation is a free gift. It is unmerited. This is the cornerstone of Luther’s ‘sola fide’ [or justification by faith alone].” Perhaps Jacob doesn’t realize that he cannot earn God’s love. Perhaps he doesn’t understand God’s unmerited grace. Or maybe he’s just one of the first of many overachievers, relying too much on his own strength, rather than relying on God. At least, until this night of wrestling. A night that presages a great change in Jacob’s life. He’s just left Laban’s service, sneaking away in the middle of the night with his family, and is fearful about meeting his brother, Esau again. God also has plans for Jacob.

Christian professor and author, William A. Ward, writes, “Change, like sunshine, can be a friend or a foe, a blessing or a curse, a dawn or a dusk.” In the context of tonight’s reading from Genesis, there’s both blessing and curse for Jacob. It’s almost unimaginable for us to consider that God might assault us in order to bless us, but that is apparently what happens to Jacob. And frankly, the same thing has happened to many of us, albeit in different ways. Some of us call it the proverbial two by four around the head. Some of us may have seen similar blessing and curse scenarios play out in our own lives or the lives of others in different ways. For example, through our finances, ministries, our physical, emotional or spiritual health, or through a major life-changing event. There are at least two ways to look at this dramatic change for Jacob that reflects our own life stories. The first is our weakness in power, and God’s power in our weakness. Consider Paul’s own request to God to remove the thorn from his side, God’s refusal, and Paul’s final acceptance in

the words of 2 Corinthians 12:9 where God says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” This painful condition makes it clear to Paul and us that we are utterly dependent on God alone.

The second way of looking at change focuses on God’s way of moving us into change. As we heard on Sunday, God does not settle for the status quo. While Jacob is waiting for his blessing, the mysterious man tells him that he is no longer called Jacob, but has been given the new name of Israel. He will go forward with this new identity, bearing a permanent limp because his hip is “put out of joint” by the man during their night of wrestling. The name Jacob means trickster or supplanter. The name Israel can mean God rules, God preserves, and God protects, amongst other interpretations. The nation and community of Israel is born in and through Jacob’s struggle with God. Jacob receives the gift or the curse of a permanent, physical, and probably painful reminder of his blessed relationship with God. Yet, there is perhaps a more profound lesson here on how we rely on our own strength to struggle with God in our lives, to maintain our independence, rather than submit to God in faithful obedience. How then does God get our attention, or retain our focus on Him? We might also ask in what ways has life wounded us such that it brought us into a deeper relationship with God? Has our own identity changed or been transformed since we have given our lives to Christ? Do we find it easier to recognize our blessings? Or even to see a blessing from God in what others might view as a curse?

There’s little doubt that Jacob epitomizes how hard it is for us to change, and to allow ourselves to be weak so that we might be strong in the Lord. Paul calls it boasting in our weakness, so that we may be filled by Christ, strengthened in Him and led by the Spirit. After all that has happened during the night, Jacob finally gives thanks to God for his life. He continues his journey as the sun rises upon him. Just as you and I lean on God’s strength to continue our own journeys through life’s struggles and hardships, always giving thanks to God for our blessings. In many ways, change is like living our resurrection lives now. We give thanks for those things that are passing away in our lives, comforted in the knowledge of God’s graceful provision and care. We ask for God’s blessing on all that is new, different, or challenging in our lives, in the sure knowledge that God loves us so much that He only desires what is best for us. God bless you!

Amen.