Invitation to the Table

This week I participated in a virtual event presented by the Center for Action and Contemplation—the organization founded by Franciscan Priest, Richard Rohr.

The event asked "How Can We Reclaim Jesus From Empire?" I suspect you'll hear more about it in the near future. I have the whole concept if you're interested.

One of the presenters was Edith Woodley, an Eastern Shoshone woman and a "Seed Keeper." She and her husband raise a garden and, when they harvest the fruits and the vegetables, they preserve some of the seeds and plant them the next Spring; so, their garden becomes self-replicating.

The Moderator made the connection with Jesus' parable of the sower: the Divine word is like seed, and the kingdom becomes self-replicating. And one of the presenters developed a theme of "From Seed to Table."

And all these wonderful metaphors were just flying around the room, opening new and deeper understandings of God's presence—God's kingdom: "From Seed to Table;" "I am the Bread of Life."

And it struck me, when I look where all these metaphors are pointing, I recognize that God's presence—God's kingdom—is here. The kingdom is not somewhere "out there." The kingdom is within and among us.

From Seed to Table—a Table: itself a metaphor of the kingdom, because there's a place for everyone.

Our Communion hymn is #411, "For the Bread Which You Have Broken."

Pastoral Prayer

God of infinite, embracing, inviting love, your son told us to pray without ceasing; but, God, we have lives to live. Vacations are winding down; school's about to start; the holidays are just around the corner… Loved ones are having surgery and biopsies and dealing with aging and health issues. Pray without ceasing?

Jesus told parables about the persistent widow and the midnight friend; he told his disciples to ask, seek, and knock and promised open doors.

And there are so many stories in the Bible: Hannah prayed relentlessly for a child; Elijah prayed seven times before rain came; Daniel fasted and prayed for twenty-one days… But, "without ceasing?"

We know that prayer grows our faith; it changes our heart and builds spiritual strength. It grows our trust in you. And we do want that.

And, sometimes when I pray, I discover that I'm better at focusing on my work—and on my relationships—and on my attitude.

God, I know you want to hear from us. We look forward to the phone calls from our kids and our grandkids. Sometimes it feels like the only time we hear from them is when they need something. Is it like that with you?

But, God, we're so busy. Henry David Thoreau got pretty close to us when he said most people live lives of quiet desperation.

Forgive us.

God, can we start with baby steps? Can we start with regular, planned and scheduled prayer time—even if just for a few moments? Can we work up from there to persistence while we struggle with "without ceasing?"

Do your magic in our hearts as we worship today. Teach us that you can turn our quiet desperation into bold determination; and remind us in some unforgettable way that you are with us—always.

Amen.

MY DAY IN COURT

PSALM 17:1-7, 15 (NRSVUE)

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
2 *From you let my vindication come;*
let your eyes see the right.
3 *If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,*
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
4 *As for what others do, by the word of your lips*
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
5 *My steps have held fast to your paths;*
my feet have not slipped.
6 *I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;*
incline your ear to me; hear my words.
7 *Wondrously show your steadfast love,*
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.

15 *As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;*
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Remember Jacob? We looked at his story two weeks ago. He fraudulently copped his twin brother's place in the family will. Wheeler-dealer; schemer… In fact, all the men in that family, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's eldest son, Judah, were skilled in "The Art of the Deal;" not so skilled in business ethics.

So, Jacob's brother, Esau—the one he scammed out of his inheritance—was enraged and Jacob had to get out of town.

We didn't read the Lectionary reading from Genesis, but he's coming home. He'd gone up north, fallen in love, gone into business with his father-in-law. Ended up with two wives, eleven sons (#12 would come later), flocks of sheep and camels… As he nears home, word on the street is that Esau's coming to meet him.

Spoiler alert: Esau's done pretty well for himself; and he welcomes Jacob home with open arms. But Jacob spent a very restless night before they met.

Remember his first night on the road, sleeping with a rock for a pillow? dreaming of angels moving up and down a stairway connecting heaven and earth, a "thin place." I suggested thin places are not geographical places but places of availability—or vulnerability—in our lives. When we're ready, we'll sense the Holy Presence that never left us; we'll hear the voice that has called to us many times.

So, God spoke to Jacob and repeated the covenant made with his grandfather, Abraham and his father, Isaac: "I will bless you so you will be a blessing…and

all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your offspring." And Jacob woke up and said, "Surely the Lord was in this place and I didn't know it!"

Well, in today's reading he's sleeping on the banks of the Jabbok River and the text doesn't say he's dreaming; it just says he wrestled with a man all night. Some say it was God, some say it was an angle, some say Jacob was wrestling with himself. Whatever, they fought so hard Jacob threw his hip out of joint.

Then the man said, "Let me go, it's almost daylight." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, until you bless me."

The man said, "What is your name?" and Jacob told him. And 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 he blessed him.*** **(GENESIS 32:28-29)**

We all need a blessing.

I've taken some ideas from Bruce Epperly's commentary[1] and gone off in a different direction. I hope I'm not mangling his point too bad.

We need a blessing from our parents, significant others, and God, especially in challenging times, whether we wrestle with issues of conscience, relationships, politics, or faith. Receiving a blessing may not solve our problems, but it alerts us that there is a way forward when we see no way.

Encountering the Holy can leave us wounded as well as blessed. Jacob wrestles with a stranger he believes is God, and receives both a blessing and a limp.

To be blessed is to be right with the world and at home in our own skin. But unless the blessing is *authentic*, we're vulnerable to fake blessings based on materialism, status, power, control... Jacob is successful, but still seeks a blessing. He was blessed by his father Isaac, but that was a fake blessing, grounded in deception and violation of another.

How might certain political and business leaders' lives and values have been altered for the good had they been authentically blessed as children and youth?

Blessing enables us to let go of self-justification and trust that there is a power who seeks our well-being. Blessings enable us to know that we are of value, that we matter and have no need to justify our existence by putting others down.

But, be aware: God may be the source of our wrestling. God may be questioning us, challenging us, asking what it will take for us to feel blessed; to change our lives in order to respond to God's call to be partners in the covenant to ***be*** a blessing? What would it take for us to be able to bless others—individually or together?

In today's Psalm, the Psalmist is also wrestling for a blessing; but, while

[1] We All Need A Blessing – Lectionary Commentary – August 2 | Bruce Epperly

Jacob wants to avoid the consequences of previous misbehavior, the Psalmist is seeking vindication amid unjust persecution. And while Jacob's match was physical—at least metaphorically, the Psalmist wrestles verbally, as in a courtroom.

That's typical of much Hebrew Scripture; it's presented in the language of the courtroom. The book of Job is a classical example. The late biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann said the rabbis studied and discussed the Scriptures in that same kind of way and the scribes followed suit, a process he called testimony/counter-testimony—plaintiff versus defendant. That's why there seem to be contradictions in the Hebrew Scriptures: the rabbis and scribes are looking at contradictory possibilities of understanding God's relationship with Israel. That's one of the ways divine inspiration works.

So, the Psalmist has his day in court. He's the defendant, wrongly persecuted and petitioning the court for justice. He's been faithful, but he needs the intimacy of God's presence. He needs to feel God's support and affirmation in this time of conflict; only God's blessing can strengthen him to endure the threats he faces. Like Jacob, he calls out in the night, yearning for God's blessing.

But watch this: both the Psalmist and Jacob demonstrate a quality of character very common in the Hebrew Scriptures; they're not afraid to stand before God and present their case. Jacob said, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** The Psalmist begins: "***Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry…"***

I love those scenes in "Fidler on the Roof" when Tevya has a conversation with God. I think my favorite is "If I Were a Rich Man."

Oh, Lord, you made many, many poor people
I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor
But it's no great honor either
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?

And his song is filled with images of ease and status and respect… And he closes:

Would it spoil some vast eternal plan
If I were a wealthy man?

All through the play Tevya has these conversations with God that are so typical of the Hebrew concept of their relationship with God.

It's not in today's Lectionary, but in Luke 18 Jesus tells a parable about an uncaring judge and a widow who keeps hounding him with the plea, "Grant me justice against my adversary." The judge ignores her for a time, but finally says to himself, "I don't really care, but if I don't see that she gets justice, she'll never leave me alone!" And so, she has her day in court.

And Jesus says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God bring

about justice for those who cry out to him day and night?"

Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" The Psalmist ends his plea: ***"As for me, I will behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I will be satisfied..."***

God doesn't withhold blessings or dangle them in front of us like a carrot. The issue is that we're not attentive enough to the presence, not receptive enough to the blessing; so, our need for persistence in prayer is not to convince God but to align ourselves with God's presence and with the direction God is moving; to put ourselves in position to be blessed. To have our day in court.

And look what happens to Jacob when the blessing comes: ***"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed."***

For Jacob, the blessing is in realizing and accepting who he is and what that means: and an entire nation would be named after him and his twelve sons would be the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel! No longer thrashing around from one scam to another; no longer wheeling and dealing for the fake blessings.

Receiving a blessing may not solve our problems, but it alerts us that there is a way forward when we see no way. Jacob found the real deal because we would not let go until the blessing came.

Pray with me.

SIGN-UP TABLE