

TAKING GOD TO THE MAT

July 31, 2011

So I have a question for you this morning: Who in this room is from Green Bay for all your life? You were born here, you were raised here and you're still here. For who is that true? Well, it's true for a few. Now, how about for the rest of you? Who's from a long way away – whether it's a long way in time or a long way in geography? More of us...more of us are from somewhere else. More of us identify home as a place that's not Green Bay.

And for those of us who do, there can be just a whole lot of nostalgia about that place that was our first home, that place that we can go back to. And that nostalgia that overflows in the word *home* gets captured up in music for us. Some of us can hear Tom Jones singing "The Green, Green Grass of Home." Some of us can hear John Denver singing "Country Roads, Take Me Home." And then of course there is that wonderful thing based on the largo from Dvořák's Ninth Symphony: "Going Home."

It's been almost forty years for me since I left home, so I know about the nostalgia and the romance. But, you know, some of the memories of home aren't all that nostalgic or romantic. Sometimes the memories of home are sobering and they're painful. When you go home, you see things and you experience places that also make you remember what wasn't so great.

Well it had been a very long time since Jacob went home. And now, finally, Jacob was homeward bound. And he wasn't going there just to visit; he was going to stay. And going home for Jacob made him face up to who he was. Yes, there was some nostalgia and there was some romance, but there was also a sobering reality to be faced when he got there. Jacob, you see, had cheated his twin brother, Esau, out of his birthright and his blessing. And then he left home. Jacob left home because Esau threatened to kill him if he didn't. For twenty years, Jacob had been away. For twenty years he had lived in the household of his Uncle Laban and labored there. And there, in his uncle's household, he married his cousins. He married Leah and he married Rachel.

But after twenty years of being away, Jacob decided it was time to go home. It was time to fulfill his birthright and his blessing. So he took all that he had accumulated in his Uncle Laban's household. He took his entourage of family, and of servants, and of livestock, and of possessions and he headed home. But, on that homeward journey, the prospect of facing his brother, Esau, made all the nostalgia and the romance dry up.

And then, as they got closer, one day Jacob's servants came to him and they said: "Esau's coming and he has four hundred men with him." And Jacob was terrified. So, being crafty and cunning as he was, Jacob divided his livestock, and his possessions, and his servants into two and he sent them in different directions. And then he took his family across the Jabbok River. And then Jacob went back across the river and waited. There he spent the night alone: waiting to meet Esau...to face his brother who was bringing along four hundred men.

While he waited that night, he was ambushed. Out of the shadows he was attacked, but his attacker was not his brother. His attacker was a stranger. All night he wrestled with this attacker, and neither of them prevailed. They were evenly matched. But Jacob's opponent...Jacob's attacker...was a dirty fighter and he grabbed hold of Jacob's hip socket. And

he ripped it out of joint. And there was a nauseating cracking sound, and the flesh tore, and his body was filled with a white-hot, stabbing pain. Yet Jacob did not give up. In spite of the pain and with his teeth clenched, Jacob said: “I won’t let you go until you bless me! I won’t let you go until you bless me!”

Well that demand was no surprise coming from Jacob because, for all of his life, Jacob had been obsessed with getting a blessing. For Jacob a blessing meant some kind of privilege. It meant protection. It meant possessions. That’s why Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, out of Esau’s blessing: because he wanted all that protection and privilege and possessions. And so now, true to form, Jacob is demanding a blessing again...this time, a blessing from a stranger.

And Jacob got it. Jacob got a blessing, but it wasn’t the blessing that Jacob wanted. The blessing was that after that night Jacob was forever lame. His hip was never the same. And his blessing was that he got a new name. The stranger said: “Your name is not Jacob any longer. It’s Israel. Your name is Israel because you have striven with God and humans and you have prevailed.”

Jacob, you see, was scrappy. He was determined. He was defiant. Jacob was ready to take anyone to the mat – including God – to get what he wanted. So Jacob wrestled. Jacob wrestled with God for a blessing. Jacob wanted fame and fortune, but instead he got purpose and promise.

Purpose and promise: that’s the blessing that Jacob got. “You will establish God’s nation: there’s your purpose; there’s your promise, Jacob. And that nation will not be named for your grandfather, Abraham. Nor will it be named for your father, Isaac. No, that nation will be named for you with your new name, **Israel!** And by that nation, God will bless all the nations of the earth.”

Jacob took God to the mat. Have you? Have you ever wrestled, or argued, or bargained or pleaded with God for a blessing? Have you ever gotten that up-close and personal with God? Have you ever gotten in God’s face...or have you always kept God at a distance? Have you ever wrestled with God for what will prevail in your life? Will it be your will or God’s will? Will it be your purpose or God’s purpose? Will it be your greatness or God’s glory?

Well, friends, the truth is that God never gives us anything without expecting something back. As Jesus said:

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

God never gives anything without expecting something back. More than that, God’s blessing is not fame and fortune. No, God’s blessing is a place in God’s purpose and promise for us.

As we come face to face with Jesus today, going home is the farthest thing from Jesus’ mind. You see, Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, has just been beheaded. He’s been killed at the sport and the spite of Queen Herodias. And, with that devastating news, all Jesus can think about is getting away, of being alone, of having some space and some time to grieve. So He gets in a boat and He sails off to a lonely place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. But the crowd that has

been following Him is so persistent and so determined that they won't let Him go. They won't give Him any peace. Instead, they follow Him on foot. And when Jesus comes ashore, He discovers that five thousand families have already arrived there to greet Him and to use Him. Well, we might have been furious at that kind of a welcoming party, but not Jesus. Instead of giving them anger, He gave them compassion and He healed their sick.

But then evening was coming. And it was, remember, a lonely place. And Jesus' disciples came to Him and they raised a practical issue. They said:

Master, 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.

You see, the disciples were overwhelmed by the challenge. It was supper time, and there were five thousand hungry families out in the wilderness, and they felt some kind of obligation to feed them. Those disciples said to Jesus: "You know, we don't even have enough for ourselves, so could we just ignore the fact that they're hungry and send them home?"

Jesus looked at His disciples and He asked: ***What do you have?*** And they said: ***Five loaves and two fish.*** So Jesus answered them. He said: ***Bring them here. Bring me the loaves. Bring me the fish, and bring me the people, too.*** And, as you know, they were all fed, and twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered up.

Now, folks, the significance of this story is not in the miraculous multiplication of five loaves and two fish, though that's where we have always gone with this story: five loaves and two fish...enough to feed a multitude. No, I think the significance – the *real* significance – of this story is in Jesus' command to His disciples. Do you remember what He told them? He said: ***You give them something to eat!***

Jesus' disciples were seduced by two little evil words, and those words are: ***We can't! We can't feed this crowd! We're poor and weak. We don't have enough. We can't.***

How often are we seduced by those two little words? How often are we seduced by ***We can't?*** In these recent days, how often have we heard those two words in our current debt crisis? ***We can't. We can't find a way! We can't compromise!***

And how often do we hear those two little words in our society? ***We can't afford Social Security and Medicare. We can't take more responsibility for each other. We can't reform healthcare. We can't give up our toxic lifestyles. We can't provide quality education. We can't restructure welfare. We can't care for our environment.*** How often do we hear those words about almost everything in our society?

And, how often do we even hear those words in church? ***We can't talk about grace, and love, and discipleship, and Jesus in public! We can't invite our neighbors to church. We can't change the way we've always done it. We can't forget ourselves for the sake of others.***

We can't. We can't. We can't! Friends, those two words say that we are small and weak. ***We can't.*** And so I wonder: are we really happier when we're worthless and pointless? Are we really stronger when we're passive and when we're victims? Are we really more important

when we consume rather than contribute? Remember what Jesus said to His disciples: ***You give them something to eat!*** Remember what the stranger said to Jacob: ***You are Israel! Build my nation!***

I can't baptize anyone without remembering Harold Wilke. Some of you have heard this story, but it's a good one and you'll like it a second time! This congregation knows Harold Wilke because he was here twenty-some years ago and helped this congregation to see the importance of saying ***we can*** to accessibility for this building.

Harold Wilke was a Missouri farm boy who was mired down in ***I can't***. You see, Harold was born without arms. Nothing...no arms at all. And, along the way without arms, Harold wrestled with God. And God convinced Harold that Harold was being called to ministry. So Harold began to prepare himself, but when he went to have his admissions interview at Eden Theological Seminary – my seminary and Peggy's seminary – he was told: ***You can't. How could you ever be a minister without arms? You can't!***

Well, he didn't listen. He applied to Union Theological Seminary in New York instead, and he graduated. And then he went home to Missouri to be ordained. And, amazingly, the same person who told him he couldn't be admitted to Eden Seminary was on his examination committee. (This guy just wouldn't go away!) And so, in the midst of the ordination examination, this man asked Harold: ***How could you ever baptize a baby? You don't have any arms!*** His answer was: ***I'll use my lips and I'll kiss the water from the font to the child.*** Harold would not give in to ***I can't***. And, after that answer, neither did anyone else.

Friends, it's time for us to take God to the mat. It's time for us to wrestle with God and to demand a blessing: not the blessing of fame and fortune, but the blessing of a place in God's purpose and promise. It's time for God to change our lives with a limp: a reminder every step of the way that we belong to God...and with a new name, ***disciple***...and, finally, with a new perspective: ***We can, and we will!***

In just a moment we're going to sing ***Blessed Assurance! Jesus is mine!*** As you sing it, listen to the words, and pay attention to the purpose and the promise that we sing. The ***blessed assurance*** you see, is that Jesus is ours...that Jesus' work – His purpose and His promise – are ours to live out. It's time now for us to use those blessings. It's time for all of us to be ***praising our Savior with everything that we do, all the day long!*** Amen.

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