

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday August 2nd, 2026 – (Year A. Pentecost +10)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church

Bible passages: Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSVUE)

“You give them something to eat”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

Today's title is 'You give them something to eat'. This is what Jesus said to his disciples that day during the feeding of the 5,000. But the disciples didn't seem too happy about being told that. They complained. They only had one small basket of bread and fish, barely enough to feed themselves let alone a vast crowd. It was an impossible situation. They were reluctant. They lacked faith. And they were probably tired. So, it was a kind of argument with Jesus. Many years before, Jacob had what is called a 'wrestle' with God. I guess it was a kind of test. That wrestle with God was a turning point for Jacob. He needed a hard encounter before he could have God's true blessing and be a blessing to others, just as the disciples needed a hard encounter before they could bless others. There are times we too need to wrestle with God, to grow us and help us be a blessing to others.

MESSAGE

Sophie and I have a son-in-law who plays competition badminton. He's very good. A few months ago he invited us to have a game with him, just for fun. I used to play a bit of badminton, decades ago, so I was keen to prove I still 'had it'. So there I was, running around the court, thinking to myself, "I'm doing pretty well here. My age is no problem at all. I'm just like I was at 30." Then it happened. I lunged for a backhand and felt a sharp pain in my foot. That pain took months to go away. That pain kept me humble about my age and my abilities!

I'm sure most of you can relate to this. You spend a few hours in the garden, because that's what you've always done, and you end up with a crook back. You kick a footy with your grandkids like you always did and you pull a hamstring. You go for a hike, and you can't walk for a week. The pain keeps us humble.

In today's story from Genesis, Jacob got into a wrestling match with God and in the process ended up with an injured hip resulting in a limp. It was a limp that kept him humble.

It's a fascinating story. Jacob and his big family are heading back to Canaan having been away for twenty years. He had fled Canaan to escape his angry twin brother Esau and went to live with his uncle Laban in Haran. While there he married two of his cousins, Rachel and Leah and had lots of kids. But after stealing a lot of his uncle's livestock, by deceit, he had to flee, yet again.

Jacob seemed to get into trouble often, at his own doing. He unfairly took his Esau's birthright. He deceptively took Esau's first-son blessing. He tricked his uncle to gain all his best lambs and goats. As a 'father of the faith' Jacob certainly had a lot to answer for.

He must have been carrying a real burden of fear, guilt, and shame the night he was camped beside the Jabbok River - the night he wrestled with God until dawn. Well, was it God? Was it an angel? Was it just a man? (some suggest it was Esau). Or was it just a dream? In any case, at the end of the 'wrestle', he got three things from this stranger: A blessing; A new name, 'Israel'; and a limp from an injured hip. What does all this mean?

What do you think? What is it about this story that moves you or disturbs you or confuses you? What does the wrestling with this stranger, whom Jacob believes was God, signify in his life? Have you ever wrestled with God, so to speak? If so, has your wrestling left you with a blessing, or a limp, or both?

One thing seems quite clear. This was a turning point for Jacob. One of those life changing experiences in which something changed in him, not just his name. One of those growing experiences. But it came only through struggle and pain.

As we sit with that thought, let's jump to our gospel story, because there is a connection here to this idea of wrestling with God.

Jesus has just received the devastating news that his beloved cousin John had been executed in horrific fashion by Herod. That meant two things for Jesus. One is that he was surely plunged into deep grief. Another is that John's death meant it was only a matter of time before they would catch up with Jesus and kill him too. At a human level he was at a very low point. He needed to get away and be alone for a while. But no, the crowds still came, already waiting for him at the remote spot he was going to.

Now it doesn't say this, but I'm pretty sure Jesus had a bit of a wrestle with God at this point. "Father I'm emotionally spent. I can't do this right now. Make them go away." (I'm adding my own bits to the bible!).

He was injured. He was limping. Yet something overcame him. That something was *compassion*. Like a driving force, this compassion compelled him to heal what needed healing among this desperate crowd. In the original Greek that word 'compassion' was way more than just a strong thought in one's mind. Compassion was like a physical feeling in one's gut, like an ache inside. An ache even greater than his own pain of loss and fear. An ache that drove him to do something. It was God's ache inside him.

Sometimes when we honestly wrestle with God, he gives us an ache to do something. I think we need that ache. The disciples needed to learn how to let that ache take over their doubts and fears. All they could see, in their human limited vision, was a huge crowd with no food. All they could see was a big problem and they wanted that problem to go away. "Send them home", they told Jesus (v15).

But Jesus says to them "You give them something to eat" (v16) Maybe it was like Jesus telling them, "Let your compassion be like mine. Let it become a strong ache in you that drives you to do something. Just do something".

At this point, if you think like me, you might have two questions. Firstly, what could the disciples do anyway in such an impossible situation of need? We can understand why they 'wrestled' with Jesus! And, secondly, how did this miracle actually happen?

We could get into a long debate about this miracle, which is not my intention today, suffice to say that this miraculous feeding sits in the context of many other miracles of Jesus at that time, including the healing of sick people in that very crowd, with these miracles not only helping people, but demonstrating the divine authority of Jesus.

But as important as miracles are, perhaps more important is simply the feeding of hungry people. Food is a basic necessity for life. It's a need we all have. And this was not just a crowd of people missing one evening meal. This was a crowd living under a Roman oppression where most people were kept poor and under-nourished, and often sick as a result. Life was a miserable struggle for so many. Aside from any spiritual needs they had, they were hungry and needed food. So Jesus gave them a banquet.

This story, if nothing else is a call to feed hungry people – to do *something* to feed them.

It's true that Matthew uses this story to make some theological points. The provision of miraculous bread in a remote place is a reminder of how God provided manna in the desert in Moses' time. The way Jesus gave thanks, broke and gave out the bread was a preview of the last supper. Then of course there was the not-too-subtle comparison of this life-giving banquet in a humble outdoor setting to the lavish, over-the-top banquet of Herod in the preceding passage, held in such a contrasting environment of greed, pride, arrogance and disregard for life.

But the main take away, I think, needs to be Jesus' statement to his disciples – *also to us*, "You give them something to eat" (v16). After all, God's Kingdom is only made real through *action*. Do *something*, as your compassion leads you. Do *anything*. Even a small thing. Remember last week's tiny mustard seed story and the potential in the small things? Start small, and trust God with what you do and what you bring.

Feeding people food – or feeding them whatever presenting need they have, may involve a struggle – as it did for the disciples. We may rationalise, argue, resist along the way. But hopefully in this wrestling process we come to the realisation that we are blessed to be a blessing to others.

Jacob's wrestle with God led to a blessing so that he could be a blessing to generations to come. So off he went, limping, to serve God in a new way. Off he went with a new ache, as it were, to be a person with God's ache in his heart.

We all have our limps, because we are all human. Our limps keep us humble. Even the Apostle Paul acknowledge his limp – his 'thorn in his flesh' (2 Corinthians 12:7) which not only kept him humble but was something he became thankful for. As he concluded, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (v10).

Limps are the result of the wrestle of life and they keep us humble. But if there's a key thing coming out of today's passages it's that God wants to give us an ache, even greater than our human limp, as he gave to Jesus - a disturbing, uncomfortable ache that causes us to 'do something' for those who are hungry or suffering in whatever way. Jesus looks at each of us and says, "*You* give them something to eat".