

## 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Matthew 14:13-21; Romans 9:1-5.**

**Genesis 32:22-31** is the final story in the series that deals with Jacob's escape from Palestine in order to avoid the anger of his brother Esau, and Jacob's consequent finding of wives and being cheated by his uncle Laban in his ancestral home of Haran. This series began with Jacob's exit of Palestine at Bethel (28:10-22) as he seeks to escape the wrath of his brother because Jacob has cheated him of birthright and inheritance. It is at Bethel that Jacob meets God for the first time, where he learns that his future does not lie in the cleverness and deceit of his manipulating heart. Rather, he learns that his future lies in conforming to God's much larger design for him and for posterity, a future that would shape the world.

Leaving Palestine behind at Bethel, Jacob then travels to his ancestral home, Haran, where he meets his kinswoman, Rachel, falls in love with her and marries her. But he finds himself dealing with a man far more skilled at deceit and manipulation than he. This person is Laban, the father of Rachel, who tricks him into 14 years of serfdom and two wives (plus their two servant-women) (29:15-28). But even in spite of Laban's trickery, Jacob emerges from his indentureship under Laban the wealthier of the two – not through his own manipulation, but purely through the gracious intervention of God (30:25-43). Now, Jacob decides to face his brother Esau and returns to Palestine, ready to negotiate with him. But as he passes the portal into Palestine at the brook Jabbok, Jacob has his second encounter with God that will forever change him.

“The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (32:22-24).

This story begins with a very strong wordplay that immediately alerts the reader in Hebrew that this is a significant story, a story that must be given unparalleled attention. In Hebrew, the word for Jabbok (*ye'aboq*), the word “wrestle” (*ye'abeq*), and the name “Jacob” (*ya'aqob*) are quite similar (particularly when one keeps in mind that written Hebrew has no vowels). Thus, in Hebrew, what the passage is saying is, “Ya'aqob crossed the Ye'aboq, and a man ye'abeq with him”! Thus, the name of the river and the event that occurred there is directly linked to the story's central character. That alerts the reader that what he is about to read is the definitive story of the Jacob cycle (or at least of the Haran sequence).

And definitive story indeed it is. “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking”. But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob”. Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed”. Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved”. The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip” (vss. 25-31).

This is the story of Jacob's conversion! All that had occurred to this point was to prepare him for such an encounter with God as this. Jacob had been his own man, using trickery, pressure, manipulation and deceit to deprive his brother of his birthright and inheritance. He continued to use such tactics against his father-in-law Laban, but had been rebuffed in such a pursuit. But at Bethel, where he had departed his country to seek exile in Haran, Jacob had first met God and had learned that his life was a part of a total design being implemented by God through which all the world would be blessed. He had found wives and had been made financially successful in Haran by God. And now, at the border to the land of his birth (and of his brother), Jacob meets God once again. And in this new encounter, he is profoundly impacted and changed.

At the bank of the river, Jacob wrestles all night with one who is identified as "a man". This "man" is clearly a guard at that crossing into Palestine, controlling who is let through and who is not (sort of like a passport control officer who takes his job too seriously!). Ancient tales were full of such individuals, such as trolls guarding bridges in fairy-tales and river-demons guarding waterways in Mesopotamian stories contemporaneous with the story of Jacob. Why this "man" is here and why he is guarding the entrance into Palestine is of no importance to the author of this story. What is of importance is that Jacob meets this man at the entrance into Palestine, and he wrestles with this man all night long!

As dawn is breaking, the man insists that Jacob let him free of the struggle, the assumption being that it was the man who initiated the match, and who dominated it for much of the night, but who was now being dominated by Jacob. Yet, although the struggle is now being dominated by Jacob, he is not unscathed. The text tells us, "Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him". Jacob had now become a wounded man, and that wound would mark him for the remainder of his life<sup>1</sup>. This, of course, was an indication that Jacob had become a changed man, for the struggle with God which was not only occurring at this instant, but had been a struggle with him from his birth (although he didn't always know it) would always stay with him, no matter the degree of transformation he would experience. And yet, Jacob was not defeated by his injured thigh, just as our defeats can actually contribute to the refining of our personalities and of our mission. As Martin Luther so powerfully put it, *'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.* Why do you not let him go? Your thigh is hurt and you are already lame; what will you do? 'I feel no weakness,' says Jacob. Who is strengthening you? 'Faith, the promise, and indeed, this weakness of faith.' In this manner God is conquered when faith does not leave off, is not wearied, and does not cease but presses and urges on".<sup>2</sup>

So it is that the man insists that Jacob let him free of the struggle. Jacob declares, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" – the implication being that, although this man sought to prevent Jacob from entering Palestine, Jacob has now gained enough advantage that he has the right to require a blessing (rather than the curse of being prevented from entering the land) of his adversary. As I developed in the commentary on Genesis 12:1-9, a blessing was the act by which well-being in all of life's dimensions – corporate as well as individual, economic, political and social as well as spiritual – was passed from a more powerful "one" to another person,

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<sup>1</sup>From the description of his injury, it sounds like Jacob injured his sartorius muscle along the inside of his thigh, a muscle that is commonly injured in wrestling matches.

<sup>2</sup> Source unknown.

family, tribe or nation. God had earlier obligated God's self to Abraham by "blessing" him and thus blessing his family, his heirs, and making his heirs a blessing to the whole world. It was through their commitment to the realization of *shalom* in all of life that justice, the equitable sharing of wealth and authentic relationship with God and each other that all of humanity would have the potential to bless themselves. The assumption in this story, therefore, is that this adversary of Jacob's was more than simply another man but was a powerful force (maybe even God or an emissary of God) who could bring a blessing upon the man who had fought him to a draw!

That Jacob asked for a blessing is particularly intriguing, however. He is still not a changed man! He is once again looking out for his advantage, and given the advantage, is pressing that advantage! He wants a blessing from this strange protector of the portals of Palestine! But Jacob is not prepared for the blessing he is about to receive.

"So (the man) said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed"" (vss. 27-28).

This is the heart of the story. The blessing given by this man is "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed". And it is with the giving of this blessing that Jacob realizes that the man with whom he had wrestled all night was none other than God Himself!

The blessing is of greatest importance, setting the entire course of Jacob's remaining life. As we have often noted, the name of a person in either the Old or New Testaments was significant. It was not simply the indicator by which one is identified and known (a number could do just as well). Rather, the name was the indicator and even the predictor of this person's personality and the nature of the impact that he or she would have upon the world. And that is the essence of this blessing. The word, "Jacob" means "the supplanter". And that was exactly what Jacob had been, for he had successfully sought to supplant his brother's birthright and inheritance as first-born and heir-apparent of the Abrahamic clan. And Jacob had attempted to supplant his father-in-law Laban, both in economics and in position, even after he had first met God at Bethel. He had been the one who had wrestled with all who mattered to him and his extended family, who had always sought to come out on top, and who deliberately and intentionally used every device he could to win. Jacob had always been the "supplanter".

But now, this man with whom Jacob had wrestled and who had permanently injured Jacob, gave Jacob a new name – the name by which he would be forever known and which he would pass on to the future generations of his offspring, the name "Israel". "Israel" means, "the one who strives with God" or "God strives". That is exactly what Jacob became, "the one who strives with God". And that is exactly who Jacob's descendants became – the people who knew God, who loved God and who knew God loved them totally. And yet, they (and we, too – their spiritual progeny) became those who strove and keep on striving with the God they know loves them.

We are never satisfied with relationship with that God, nor with the shalom mission that God has given to us for the world – a mission of building and maintaining a nation, a city, a neighborhood, a business, a church of justice, of the equitable sharing of wealth, of battling against poverty, of embracing an ever-deepening relationship with God and each other. Instead, we always want more – more power, more prestige, more possessions, even more parochialism (i.e., people just like us) – and so we keep eternally striving with God.

Thus, Jacob became Israel. And with that name change, the author is signaling the conversion of Jacob. For he is no longer Jacob – the supplanter. He has now become -- because of God's intervention and God's continuing struggle with him – the one who strives with God! And thus, with his conversion from Jacob to Israel, that man has now become the person who can now inherit the mantle of Isaac and of Abraham and thus become the patriarch of a people who would enable all the peoples of the earth to bless themselves!

The story ends both powerfully and poignantly. The closing words of the story are these: “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved”. The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip” (vss. 30-31). The miracle of transformation has taken place: “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved”. Thus, to commemorate this profound transformation both in and through him, Jacob names the place “Peniel” – “the face of God”. But the end of the story is not only powerful. It is also poignant. “So he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip”. His hip Jacob would carry with himself for the remainder of his life. And so will we. For in wrestling with God, even when it leads to our transformation, even when it re-directs us to the transformation of the world into God's shalom community, we are always “wounded healers”. We will always limp because of our hip. For our defects, our weaknesses, our temptations, our usurpation of God's intention for us, will always be with us, for we are also Jacob as well as Israel, and both stay with us for the remainder of our lives!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), the great hymn writer of the Methodist revivals in Great Britain and America, put it well in his profound hymn, “Come, O Thou Traveler”.

“Come, O thou Traveler unknown, whom still I hold, but cannot see! My company before is gone, and I am left alone with Thee. With Thee all night I mean to stay, and wrestle till the break of day.

“I need not tell Thee who I am, my misery and sin declare; Thyself hast called me by my name, look on thy hands and read it there. But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou? Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.

“Wilt Thou not yet to me reveal Thy new, unutterable Name? Tell me, I still beseech Thee, tell; to know it now resolved I am. Wrestling, I will not let Thee go, till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

“’Tis all in vain to hold Thy tongue or touch the hollow of my thigh; Though every sinew be unstrung, out of my arms Thou shalt not fly. Wrestling I will not let Thee go, till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

“My strength is gone, my nature dies, I sink beneath Thy weighty hand. Faint to revive, and fall to rise, I fall, and yet by faith I stand. I stand and will not let Thee go till I thy Name, Thy nature know.

“Yield to me now, for I am weak, but confident in self-despair. Speak to my heart, in blessings speak. Be conquered by my instant prayer. Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move; Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.

“Contented now upon my thigh I halt, till life’s short journey end. All helplessness, all weakness I on Thee alone for strength depend. Nor have I power from Thee to move; Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

“Lame as I am, I take the prey. Hell, earth, and sin with ease o’ercome. I leap for joy, pursue my way, and as a bounding hart fly home, through all eternity to prove Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.”

**Psalm 17:1-7, 15** is a prayer for deliverance from persecution. It is asking God for protection from threatening enemies that is centered in the conviction of the psalmist that God is absolutely dependable and so one can be confident in casting his/her lot with God. Verses 1-2 appeal to God for vindication in the light of the enemy’s criticism or attack. Verses 3-5 assert that the psalmist is innocent of every crime or wrongdoing of which he is charged. Verses 6-9 are the author’s petitions to God for protection. Verses 10-12 is an attack of those who so criticize and seek to undermine him, and is very graphic, likening his critics to a lion “eager to tear” and “lurking in ambush”. Verses 13-14 is the request that God not only vindicate him and punish the critics. It is a request that God decimate them. Finally, verse 15 brings the psalm to conclusion, with the psalmist’s expression of hope “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness”.

One can see why the editors of the lectionary did not include verses 9-14 in the reading, given their aversion to violence. For it is most specific in how the psalmist wants his critics dealt with. Most graphic is the statement, “They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly”. That verse is better translated, “They are clogged with their blubber; with their mouth they speak arrogance itself”.<sup>3</sup> It is meant to be compared with the author’s wish for those who remain faithful to Yahweh and don’t rend those with whom they disagree: “But as for your treasured ones -- may their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their little ones” (vs. 14).

What is most surprising in the portion of Psalm 17 used in the lectionary is the absence of verse 8, which has to be one of the best known and loved lines in the Psalter. It reads, “Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings”. It talks both about God’s caring and even delight in those who follow Him, and of God’s protection of his precious Psalmist. It is the high point of the psalm.

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<sup>3</sup>Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I (1-50)*, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 92.

The phrase, “guard me as the apple of the eye” is actually better translated “as the pupil of the eye” (*ison bat ‘ayin*). The reference is to an eagle that is fixing its unblinking stare on its chicks in its nest, guarding them and, if necessary, flying to their defense in order to guarantee their safety (cf. Deut. 32:10b-11a, Ezek. 16:9, Job 8:17, Prov. 8:2). That metaphor is followed by another allusion to the protective eagle sitting on its nest in the words, “hide me in the shadow of your wings” that are spread over the chick and shielding it from all harm. It is a reminder to the Psalmist and to all of us who are chosen by God that we are precious to Him, even when we’re feeling depressed and overwhelmed. God doesn’t stop loving us, even when we’re not feeling particularly loved. God doesn’t stop caring about us or “guarding” us even when we feel overwhelmed.

**Matthew 14:13-21** is Matthew’s telling of the Feeding of the 5,000. It is a most intriguing examination about the Godly use of power to liberate and strengthen the people versus the systems’ use of power to oppress and dominate the people.

To fully appreciate Matthew’s insights into the Feeding of the 5,000, one must take note of the stories that immediately precede and succeed it, for it is meant by Matthew to be an integrated message.

The story that precedes Jesus’ miracle of feeding the people is the story of the slaying of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, tetrarch (a subordinate prince) of Galilee under the Roman Empire. This is the famed story of the daughter of Herodias (unnamed) dancing erotically before Herod, and demanding the head of John the Baptist on a platter as her reward for titillating the banquet’s guests. What is most intriguing with Matthew’s telling of this blatant abuse of power, however, is the way he introduces it.

“At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him” (14:1-2).

This is an indication of the fear in which the political, economic and values-creating systems live. And that is why they brook no opposition or dissent. They are afraid! They fear any threat to their authority. They feel that even the fates are arrayed against them, much less the people. They recognize that their hold on the culture is tenuous at best. So they must act invincible. They must act as if they hold all the power. They must intimidate in all that they do. But they act that way because they recognize how ephemeral their power actually is, and how easily it can collapse.

This is demonstrated in this side comment about Herod Antipas. He has ruthlessly and against the Jewish Law disposed of John the Baptist. But even in death, John still intimidates Herod! Herod is afraid of John and what John stands for. And therefore he interprets Jesus’ powerful ministry as being “John . . . raised from the dead”. That is how insecure and frightened and intimidated the apparently powerful Herod is. This story, therefore, is an intriguing commentary on the powerlessness of the powerful!

It is in the light of this assertion that Matthew now continues his story of the marginalized Messiah. He now tells the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000.

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “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.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat”. They replied, “We have nothing here, but five loaves and two fish”. And Jesus said, “Bring them here to me”. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children” (14:13-21).

The two stories of Herod's abuse of power and Jesus' use of power to minister to the people, each centered around a feast, are meant to stand in contrast with each other. For each is a lesson in the exercise of either unilateral or relational power!

The first contrast is with Herod the man and Jesus the man. Herod is portrayed in 14:1-12 as a frightened, intimidated man, and yet one who acted unilaterally, precipitously and guided by his need to remain dominant. Thus, Jesus posed a threat to him because he thought he was the reincarnation of John (vss. 1-2). Likewise, John posed a threat to him because he publicly proclaimed the truth of Herod's incestuous affair with his niece and wife of his half brother Philip (vss. 3-4), a direct disobedience of the Law of Moses (Lev. 18:15; 20:21) as well as a morally repugnant action. The people posed a threat to Herod, because they regarded John as a prophet (vs. 5), and here John was prophesying against this king. Finally, even Herod's guests who were gathered at the feast he was giving posed a threat to Herod, because he was afraid of losing monarchial credibility in their eyes (vss. 6-10). Although pretending to be mighty and seeking to project the image of the same, Herod was in reality an intimidated, frightened and capricious king!

On the other hand, Matthew portrays Jesus as the opposite. He is portrayed as a thoughtful, compassionate and liberating king – God's kind of king – the Messiah. His reflective nature is caught up in the closing sentence of the first story and the opening sentence of the second. “John's disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this (i.e., what had happened to John), he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (vss. 12-13a).

Herod would arrest a man and imprison him for telling the truth. And he would preemptively decide to behead him on the whim of a request from the daughter of his paramour who had sexually titillated him. But Jesus is presented in an entirely different way. Receiving the news of the illegal execution of his cousin, Jesus “withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself”.

One of the elements striking about this story is Jesus' need for solitude and quiet in the midst of both demanding ministry and shocking news. That demand was heavy enough when Jesus would consider the great needs and vulnerability of Israel's peasants. But the news of John's sudden, illegal (i.e., without a trial) and precipitous death filled Jesus with even more sorrow and shock. But rather than leap into action, Jesus committed to time alone with God in order to assimilate that loss, to deal with his sorrow for John and his anger at such cavalier injustice. Jesus needed time to quiet his own soul over this travesty. Rather than acting on impulse and whimsy, Jesus acted out of careful deliberation and evaluation centered in his relationship with God.

In this story Jesus didn't get to keep his date with himself. He took a boat to sail to an uninhabited area for his reflection. But Matthew tells us, "When the crowds heard (that Jesus was going to a deserted place), they followed him on foot from the towns. And when he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick" (vs. 13b-14). Jesus needed time alone with God to sort out the implications of what had happened to John, but instead got the demands of the people. And seeing their great need, he placed his needs aside to minister to them. Thankfully, the opportunity eventually came to Jesus to have that solitude with God that he so desperately needed. He had to make that time, because Matthew tells us, "*Immediately* (after the feeding of the 5,000), he *made* the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he *dismissed* the crowd" (vs. 22). All of those italicized words are pro-active words; Jesus intentionally acted to create time for himself. Then Jesus followed his disciples for his so greatly desired season of solitude.

Jesus did make time for himself, but not at the expense of the people. And he did spend the time with God that his soul so craved, for the text tells us "he went up the mountain by himself to pray, and when evening came, he was there alone" (vs. 23b). Thus, Matthew wants the reader to see that Jesus was this thoughtful, reflective, God-grounded Messiah who was centered both in the mission of comforting the afflicted and in his own spiritual formation that could rest in his own interior center even in the midst of the devastating news of the inconsistent and dominating actions of the people's titular king. Thus, Matthew is intended to contrast the centered Jesus with the mercurial and arbitrary Herod.

Jesus is also contrasted with Herod in his relationship with the people. Herod's relationship with Israel's peasants – his subjects – was one of fear and loathing. He feared the potential power of the people to rise against him or at least to publicly embarrass him before Rome (vs. 5). His treatment of John, as well, indicated his significant disrespect of the people and his willingness to act in ways he knew would devastate them even as it would mollify his guests. Jesus, on the other hand, has "compassion for them" so that he is willing to put aside his own pressing agenda in order to "cure their sick" and to feed them. They are to him "sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). The Jewish prophets had called Herod, as it did all princes, to be the "shepherds" of the people, but he had proven in his actions to be a false shepherd who exploited and oppressed the people rather than healing and feeding them (Ezek. 34:2-10). But Jesus had proven himself the "Good Shepherd" who not only acted out compassion for these afflicted peasants, but the one who eventually would "lay down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).



But besides the contrast between Herod the man and Jesus the man, Matthew intends in these two stories to contrast the feasts that both of them have prepared for their people.

The occasion for the beheading of John the Baptist is a birthday party! Matthew tells us, “When Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company” (vs. 6a). When she demands the head of John the Baptist as her reward for titillating Herod and all his guests, Matthew tells us that “out of regard for his guests, he commanded (for the beheading) to be done” (vs. 9a).

Obviously this story is telling us that Herod had gathered those people with whom he wished to surround himself on the occasion of the celebration of his birthday. We have no idea how large a gathering that was (Mark, in his telling of this story, tells us that the party consisted of “Herod’s courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee” – Mk. 6:21). But it was substantial. And it was a party that was solely dedicated to the honoring of the tetrarch of Galilee and the meeting of his most base instincts.

The party Jesus gave was entirely different. First, it was large – “five thousand men, besides women and children” (vs. 21) – or, in other words, somewhere around 9,000 to 15,000 people. Second, they were not “courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee”, but rather “the crowd” (vs. 15) – the ordinary peasants of Israel. Third, they did not dine on the exquisite delicacies of a king’s banquet table but simply on “five loaves and two fish” – the minimum nutritious meal available to peasants. But what a banquet they had!

Second, Matthew, with his deep sensitivity to the history of Israel that moves through the warp-and-woof of his entire book, intentionally frames this feast in ways that resonate with a number of ancient Israelite metaphors. Herod’s birthday party is nothing more than a feast for sensual (both food and sex) gratification. But Jesus’ party is carefully constructed by Matthew to remind the Jewish reader that this is an event that comes out of Israel’s past.

First, the banquet is held not in a king’s palace but in a “deserted place”, or in other words, the “wilderness” (vs. 13). This is meant to resonate with the Jewish reader’s recognition that liberation came for Israel, not in a pharaoh’s court but on a desert Mount Sinai where the Law was given; it was the wilderness where the nation of Israel was born and the people fed (Exod. 16:1-36). Likewise, the very miracle of feeding the people out of virtually nothing immediately reminds the Jewish reader of the comparable miracle enacted in the feeding of the people in the wilderness with manna and quail when they faced certain starvation (Exod. 16) and of Elisha’s miraculous rescue of a hundred peasants from certain starvation through a small offering of the first fruits of barley and grain (II Kings 4:42-44). Thus, Herod’s banquet is exposed as only a birthday party for an immoral and illegitimate pretender while Jesus’ banquet is the fulfillment of the Old Testament testimony of God’s realized intentions of the creating of the shalom community for Israel and the world.

But Jesus’ feast is even more than that. Third, Herod’s feast came as the unintended and even highly-resented complements of the taxes that Galilee’s peasants were forced to pay in support of their monarch (25% of each family’s annual income). Thus, those attending Herod’s birthday

party munched the most exotic tidbits funded by the very crowds Jesus fed. Jesus, on the other hand, produced food for the thousands gathered to hear and be healed by him.

The miraculous nature of the story is an integral element within the story itself. Jesus commanded his disciples to “give (the people) something to eat”, but in their own imagination they could not because they had “but five loaves and two fish” – and of what good is that when you have somewhere between 8,000 and 15,000 people to feed! But Jesus “ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowd. And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces – twelve baskets full” (vss. 19-20).

The very way that Matthew tells this story is designed to make front-and-center the miraculous nature of this story. Jesus had no more resources at his disposal than did his disciples. But whereas they saw this resource as “but five loaves and two fish”, Jesus saw it as sufficient resources to feed thousands of people. Whereas the disciples saw the cup as being, in essence, half-empty, Jesus saw it as half-full. The text tells us that Jesus “took” the five loaves and two fish, “blessed”, “broke” and “gave” the same to the disciples for distribution, thus following the traditional ritual used at every Jewish meal for serving a family. Thus, Jesus served his “family”. And he served them from the perspective that the little that he had been given was sufficient bounty to serve all the people of God!

Further, he served the people by “sticking it” to the disciples. A careful reading of the text indicates that the multiplication of the loaves and fish didn’t happen at Jesus’ hand, but at the disciples’ hands! That is, the text tells us that Jesus “broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples”. By the time that Jesus had distributed the divided loaves and fish between his twelve disciples, his hands were empty. He had no more. Now the burden was upon them. What would they do? Would they take the meager half of a fish and hunk of bread they had been given, and start distributing it to the people – looking like a fool in the process? Or would they say, “This is ridiculous”, and return the pieces to Jesus? This was a test of their faith. And, praise God, what each of the disciples decided to do was to be a fool for Christ! They began distributing the meager portions they had been given, and those meager portions began to multiply in their very hands!

In other words, this was a miracle for the disciples, not for the crowd. There is no indication from this text that the crowd was even aware that a miracle had taken place; to the crowd, this was simply the provision that Jesus’ disciples had made to feed such a multitude in the wilderness. The miracle happened for the disciples. And it happened so that they would ask the question, in the light of the preemptive act of Herod that threatened them all, “Who is this Jesus, truly?” That this is the question that Matthew very intentionally wants asked at this point in the narrative is made clear by the story that follows this story, another story as dramatic as the feeding of the 5,000 that indicates that this Jesus is no ordinary man – or even simply a prophet!

There is a final – and perhaps most important -- contrast contained between the two feasts given by Herod and by Jesus. Those two feasts were a comparison in the guests (courtiers versus the crowds), purpose (birthday party versus a starving people) and cuisine (delicacies versus peasant

food). They were a contrast between simple self-gratification and the resonance with Israel's past and its stories of meals rescuing an enslaved people. They were a contrast between a feast funded on the backs of Galilean peasants or a miraculous meal both to serve the poor and to shock Jesus' disciples into asking the question, "Who is this Jesus, anyway?" But, finally, this feast by Jesus was also designed to symbolize and to draw Jesus' followers into the recognition that life is much more than simply "eating or drinking", but rather in participating in the eternal banquet that is the living out of the kingdom of God!

The clue is given in Matthew's carefully selected words describing the miracle Jesus performed. He wrote, "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples" (vs. 19). Jesus "took", "blessed", "broke" and "gave" the bread that would provide life to the people! Those words were not casually selected. How do we know? Well, consider this:

"While they were eating, Jesus *took* a loaf of bread, and after *blessing* it he *broke* it, *gave* it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28; cf. Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19).

"When Jesus was at table with (the two disciples walking to Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection), he *took* bread, *blessed* and *broke* it, and *gave* it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:30-31).

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11).

"Take, bless, break, give". Jesus used these identical words at his feeding of the 5,000, his celebration of the first Lord's Supper with his disciples, and at the dinner with disciples after his resurrection. These words indicate that the feeding of the 5,000 was not simply a meal to fill a hungry crowd. Nor was it only a meal to recapture Israel's past in order to explain the action occurring at that moment. It was envisioned by Jesus as a meal for all eternity. It was the meal that announced the inauguration of God's new covenant, God's New Testament, the beginning of God's eschatological kingdom that would eventually free all humanity from its oppressive, self-indulgent Herods and would usher in God's community of justice, equity, elimination of poverty, and reconciling relationship between God and humanity itself. The kingdom was now beginning, and it was beginning in the face of the most vicious and mischievous actions that the kingdoms of despots could possibly construct!

This is the conclusion of the story of the feeding of the 5,000. But it is not the conclusion to this three-story pericope that makes a single unit written by Matthew. For there is one more story. And that story exists to answer what is given initial voice in the second story – the question "Who is this Jesus of Nazareth (in contrast to Herod Antipas)?"

The final story of this pericope (14:22-33) is the story of Jesus walking on the waves of the Sea of Galilee. Having had his quiet time on a mountain, Jesus walks on the storm-tossed sea to his

terrified disciples being tossed about on a boat making its way over that sea (14:24-27). He calms the sea and stops the storm (vs. 30), thus acting out the words of Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps. 77:16-20 and Isa. 43:16. He bids Peter to walk to him upon the sea, and Peter does so (vss. 18-31), and concludes the incident with the words, “You of little faith, why did you doubt” (vs. 31)? And the disciples respond in awe, “Truly you are the Son of God” (vs. 32). This is the answer to the question asked throughout this pericope, “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?”

Thus the answer is given to Herod’s brash action in beheading John. At the time that the Gospel of Matthew was written, the emperor Domitian was proclaimed as “ruler of lands and seas and nations” (Juvenal, *Satire* 4:83-84). But Matthew wishes the reader to know who was truly “ruler of lands and seas and nations”. It was not Domitian. And it was certainly not this self-centered petty tyrant, Herod Antipas. It was Jesus the Messiah – the one who could feed a multitude with five loaves and two fish, the one who could walk on water and calm the seas with his command, the one who comforted Israel’s afflicted and afflicted Rome’s comfortable, and thus through his body and blood “took, blessed, broke and gave” so that those who had eyes to see and ears to hear could embrace this Son of God as their own and together join with him in building his kingdom of justice, equity and oneness with God and all humanity!

**Romans 9:1-5.** Thus far in the book of Romans, Paul has argued for an inclusive salvation, as opposed to a salvation exclusively for the Jews. In the previous chapter, he has described salvation as the redemption of individuals – Gentiles as well as Jews (Rom. 8:12-17), the salvation of the corporate structures of society (8:1-11), and even the redemption of the entire universe from entropy and decay (8:18-25). Thus, Paul understood salvation as being, at one and the same time, individual, corporate and cosmic, of being personal, social and systemic. For to Paul, Christ had come to save the entire created order and all that is in it.

Within that context, Paul had been very careful to argue that salvation was for the Gentile populace and society, and not solely for the Jews. “Is God the God of Jews only?” Paul asked rhetorically. “Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised (i.e., Jews) on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised (i.e., Gentiles) through that same faith” (3:29-30). Using Abraham as the symbol of authentic Jewry, Paul argued, “What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about. But what does the scripture say? “Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”. It was his faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:1-5). Therefore, Paul concluded, it is not those who adhere to the Law of Abraham and Moses that are in relationship with God, but “those who share the faith of Abraham, who is the father of many nations” (4:16b-17a).

Paul had conclusively argued that it was not by being a blood descendant of Abraham that made a person elect and chosen of God, but his election was demonstrated in his believing God for salvation as did Abraham. It was faith and not one’s bloodline that made one a child of God and part of the community of faith. It was in that light that Paul then went on in Romans 7-8 to argue for the universal nature of salvation, as we presented in the first paragraph above.

But having made that argument, Paul was faced with a dilemma. If Israel is no longer exclusively God's chosen people, but rather God's chosen consists of all those who have responded in faith to God's call to them, what, then, do you do with the Jews? Who are the Jews, if they are not exclusively God's chosen people? It is to deal with this question that Paul pens the next three chapters of his letter to the Roman Church.

Romans 9:1 through 11:36 argue for the Jews' place in the economy of God. What is God seeking to accomplish throughout history, particularly in the light of the Jewish people who have rejected Jesus as Messiah? What is the providence of God in regards to those people who had been God's chosen but have now become those rejecting Jesus?

Paul's argument is built around four main points. He first argues that simply because a majority of the Jews and the Jewish ecclesiastical and political systems have chosen to reject Jesus as the Messiah does not mean that all Jews have rejected the Christ. After all, Paul is a Jew, all the apostles are Jews, the majority of the church is Jewish, and Jesus was a Jew! The very existence of these Jewish Christians is testimony to God's election of a saving remnant within Israel (Romans 9:6-29).

Second, the reason for Israel's corporate rejection of the gospel was their blind commitment to their legalistic understanding of God's intent for redeeming the world. They chose obedience to the minutia of the Law as the way to demand God's acceptance rather than embracing the grace of God given to them through Christ (9:30—10:21).

Third, it was Israel's rejection of the saving grace of God that opened the way for Gentiles to embrace the gospel, and thus become a part of that saving remnant of the Jewish Christians of the earliest church. If the Jews had embraced Jesus wholeheartedly, the church would have never been motivated to take their gospel to the Gentile world (11:1-12).

Finally, when thinking Jews see so many Gentiles embracing the gospel and, consequently, Yahweh, they will be struck with conviction and even jealousy at such a comprehensive response. This will, in turn, lead them to re-evaluate their attitude toward the gospel and will result in repentance, belief and their salvation (11:12-31). Thus, God will use the Gentile embrace of the gospel as a means to overcome Jewish resistance to the gospel and, consequently, their eventual return to God's authentic intentions for humanity. It is in that present rejection that one can see the providence of God at work, as God creates the conditions for Israel's eventual conversion.

This will be Paul's essential argument in Romans 9-11 as he seeks to argue a future for the Jewish people and even their systems in the economy of God. But that is not where Paul begins. Where he begins is not with his head, but with his heart!

“I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving

of the law, the worship, and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen” (9:1-5).

Paul begins by mourning for the choice Paul’s people have made in rejecting Jesus as their Messiah! His heart is breaking over that choice, made over and over again. In fact, he is in agony over both the Jewish leadership (the priestly aristocracy, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the wealthy landowners, the nobility) and the Jewish people (many of whom Jesus fed, healed, and taught). They have had unlimited opportunity to embrace God’s saving work, and that opportunity includes them as individuals, their systems and the whole nation. And yet, they have rejected that opportunity over and over again.

Paul’s anguish over their recalcitrance even goes so far that he says he would give up his own salvation, if that would cause his people to embrace Christ. “I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh”, he writes. He would willingly lay down his life for the Jewish people, if that would win them to Christ.

It is crucial to understand that this is where Paul begins this section on the place of the Jewish people in God’s providence. This is not some intellectual argument. This is not carefully parsing words and seeking to win one’s case. Paul is desperately concerned with what will be the outcome of the Jewish people’s rejection of God’s love. And these chapters are his attempt to try to deal with this tragedy, both in his own thinking and in his own heart. Whether he came to a place of resolution and peace over the argument he builds here, we will never know!

Paul begins his examination of the tragedy of the Jewish rejection of Christ by reminding the reader of all the advantages each Jew and the Jewish people have been given by God. “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, the Messiah” (vss. 4-5).

To be a part of the Jewish culture was to understand yourself as an “*adopted*” people. That is, through no merit of their own, Israel’s ancestors “according to the flesh” were chosen by God through whom “all the nations will bless themselves” (Gen. 12:3). It was not because they were such exceptional people and so naturally good that God would naturally gravitate toward them. In fact, Israel was “the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh” (Deut. 7:7-8).

Why did God choose Israel? Bennett Cerf, the comedic poet, once wrote, “How odd of God to choose the Jews”. And it was indeed odd, for the sons and daughters of Abraham had nothing to particularly commend them to God. What was the rationale for Isaac to be chosen, and not Ishmael, why Jacob was chosen and not Esau? Isaac and Jacob were certainly not better people than Ishmael and Esau. In fact, Isaac was revealed to be weak and indecisive, and Jacob to be a deceiver and manipulator of people. So why would God choose the Jews?

Why did God choose the Jews? God chose the Jews because God loved them. And why did God love them? The most profound answer is given to that question in Deuteronomy 7. God loved Israel because God loved them! God arbitrarily chose to love them. And the first Israelite whom God chose to love, Abraham, chose to respond to that love by taking God at his word and embracing that love. “Abraham believed God, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

So, with such a response on Abraham’s part to God’s election of Israel, it all followed. God revealed his creative (religious), redemptive (economic) and liberating (political) “*glory*” at the burning bush. God made “*the covenant*” with Abraham in Genesis 15 so that God would be Israel’s God and Israel would be God’s people; it was through that covenant that the whole world could be blessed. God “*gave the Law*” at Mount Sinai to Moses so that Israel would know how to live out that covenant in its political, economic and spiritual life as God’s people. God gave to Israel the “*worship*” of God made authentic by “doing justice, showing mercy and walking humbly with their God” (Micah 6:8). They received the “*promises*” made by God that Israel would be “given as a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7).

Israel had been built upon the foundation of “*the patriarchs*” (Gen. 12-49) who, “by faith” “set out for a place not knowing where he was going” or “invoked blessing for the future” or “blessed each of the sons” or “foresaw the exodus to come” (Heb. 11:8, 20-22), thus each passing on the tradition to his descendants. Finally, they were the repository of the dreams, the nation-building hopes, the recognition of suffering as the redemptive part of servanthood by “*the Messiah*” (Deut. 18:15; II Sam. 7:13-14; Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-5; ch. 53; Jer. 23:5; Dan. 9:25; Micah 5:2). All of these traditions made up all that it meant to be a Jew.

What a magnificent heritage for any nation to have! But that was precisely the problem! The heritage was the problem. What had early distinguished Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and on and on, is that they had all wrestled with God! With a minimum heritage, each of these people had dealt directly with God, had struggled with their faith, had sought to determine their call, and chose to act decisively upon it. In essence, each of them had declared to God, “I will not let you go until you bless me!” Their faith, and their struggle with their life and their responsibility toward the world was immediate, and of utmost importance to them! Their faith was no head-trip; it was a heart and soul and everything trip to them! They were engaged! And that was precisely what made their faith dynamic and real!

And that was what had gone wrong with Israel over its 2,000 years of existence. Knowing the regulations of the Law had become more important than knowing God. Orthodoxy had replaced a fervent heart. Doing the particulars of worship exactly right had substituted for working for justice for the poor. Parsing the truth had captured the imagination more than wrestling with God. The Jewish religion hadn’t burned itself out in working for the kingdom of God; it had rusted itself out! There was no more heart left, just cold doctrine and acceptable practice. The heritage designed to inspire and challenge and provoke Israel’s people and leaders had now become a barrier to recognizing the new way that God was at work in their very midst through a peasant carpenter named Jesus of Nazareth!

The problem with the Jews, Paul suggested, was that they as a nation, the leaders of their political, economic and religious systems, their priests and rabbis and lawyers, and even the ordinary people had stopped wrestling with God. They had lost sight of building God's intended community of justice, equity and relationship with God. They were now taking God for granted. Therefore, Paul's list of what made that nation special and even chosen actually condemned them, for it was a testimony of how tradition had come to substitute for lively engagement of God and one another.

The opposite of love is not hate, but neglect! Even though it is negative, to hate is to have an emotion toward another person equal to that of loving them. You may want to inflict great bodily harm upon them rather than hugging them, but at least you have the vitality of a decisive response. How much better that is than simply not caring about them, of giving up on them, of being resigned, of losing all interest, of becoming totally unengaged. To neglect another is to simply say to them that they are not worth your while to hate them anymore. They just aren't worth the energy! What an insult to another that is. And that is exactly the way that the Jewish institutions and people were treating God. He just wasn't worth the effort any more. What was worth the effort was to cooperate with Rome's agenda, to take those actions that would build favor on your behalf with those who shaped the future, and to reject anyone whose convictions would upset the smooth running of your lives, your institutions, and your nation! No wonder Paul grieved for his people – for he saw them taking the easy way out, the convenient way, the way that would create no waves – and in so doing, was losing the very genius of their heritage that had always been on the side of the poor, the enslaved, the exploited, and those who were being treated badly by life!

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