

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

Even in these trying times, I'm wondering, do you feel blessed? Or can you remember a time in your life where you've felt blessed? What does being blessed mean to you?

I, like many of us, grew up with the adage to "count your blessings" as a way of focusing on the good things in our lives. And while I believe in the power of gratitude, I have come to understand how we typically use the word blessing with more than a little skepticism.

Many of the things we commonly give thanks for as blessings – health, safety, family, financial security – are more aptly named as luck, happenstance, or the result of privilege. And when we call those blessings, whether we intend it or not, we are also saying that anyone who does not have those things (including ourselves if we lose them), is **not** blessed.

God's blessing doesn't work like that, and in fact our readings from Genesis and Matthew today present blessings in such a way as to be a warning to us: **beware – be blessed and be changed.**

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Continuing our narrative in Genesis this week, we see Jacob, his two wives and his two not quite wives, along with their children and all of their livestock returning home after years of exile.

On the last night of that arduous journey, after sending everyone and everything ahead across the river ahead of him, Jacob remained behind alone. Why? Was it to wrestle with everything that had brought him to this point? The stealing of Esau's birthright, tricking his father into giving him his brother's blessing, running away from home, being tricked into marrying Leah, finally possessing his beloved Rachel, the years of labor under his father-in-law Laban and all their back and forth trickery about livestock, the 13 children he fathered between Leah, Rachel, and their two maids, their abrupt flight from Laban, and now his impending reception from his estranged brother.

That was a lot to wrestle with – Jacob knew it and God did to – and on that night, this flawed and yet still chosen child of God ended up not only wrestling with his past, he also wrestled with God.

At first figuratively: Why did you let me make so many mistakes God? Why did all these things happen? Why have I gained everything I thought I wanted and then found out it isn't enough? Why have I suffered?

These are variations of the questions we too ask when we wrestle with God. But Jacob's experience went one step further, becoming a physical encounter as he wrestled with a heavenly visitor until daybreak.

Finally, Jacob was in a fair fight – not taking advantage of a hungry brother, a blind father, or having to outsmart a wily father-in-law. They wrestled all night without a clear winner, the visitor even striking Jacob and putting his hip out of joint, but still Jacob would not let go.

As morning approached, Jacob clung to God declaring, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

I wonder if he knew what he was *truly* asking for with that blessing. Either way, he was *truly* changed by it. In the morning light he received a two-fold blessing: a limp and a new name.

The limp to serve as a reminder that he had striven with God and yet lived, and as constant reminder that no matter the mistakes he made, and the questions he wrestled with, he was beloved of God. And the new name to signify he could run, but he could never hide – God would always look upon him. He could now face whatever his future held, limping and knowing whose he was.

Beware – be blessed and be changed.

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Today's reading from Matthew is special because it's the only story recorded in all four gospels, with slightly different versions repeated twice in both Matthew and Mark, making for a total of six versions of this story.

The loaves and the fishes. The feeding of the multitude, in today's story about 5000 men, besides women and children, being fed by a mere five loaves of bread and two fishes.

This blessing of a meal, one with what we recognize with Eucharistic overtones, at first appears to be the extent of the blessing in this story. Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to give to the crowds. All ate and were filled, and the leftover pieces filled twelve baskets.

That's a powerful blessing – however there's more blessing going on here than just loaves and fishes.

Jesus' first act of blessing was not letting the disciples talk their way out of being disciples – leading them from a mindset of self-interest to common good.

After admonishing Jesus to send the crowd away to get food, he told them instead to feed everyone themselves. Incredulously they responded, "We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fishes."

It's the perfect opening for Jesus, of course, both to teach them and to demonstrate the power of blessing. And so he took their **nothing** and blessed it, and miraculously it was more than enough.

But it wasn't just the **nothing** that was changed, it was also those who had the **nothing**, and then *shared* the **nothing**, that found themselves changed.

By blessing their insecurities, their negative attitudes, their mindset of scarcity and hoarding, Jesus changed not only how the disciples saw themselves as individuals, but how they saw themselves as leaders. Leaders whose first concern was serving the

least, the lost, and the last. It was all a piece of Jesus helping them become the people they would need to be when he was gone.

Beware – be blessed and be changed.

The same goes for us.

When we are truly blessed – whether the blessing comes from wrestling with God and leaves us with a limp, or that blessing comes from knowing our **nothing** will be enough if it is shared with others – when we are truly blessed by God, our very selves are changed and our lives are never the same because of it.

This change isn't only a one-time event that happens **to** us, it is the **choice** we make to continually be changed by the love and grace of God in our lives. It shows up in doing the hard work of wrestling with uncomfortable things and in how we share all the “blessings” we've been given.

To be blessed is indeed to be changed, if only we have the courage to accept it.

Amen.