

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jul 11th 2017

Memorial of Saint Benedict, Abbot

When I write these reflections I am not always able to connect the threads of why the different readings are presented for the day. Sometimes they just don't seem to connect. Today is one of those days. Both the Genesis reading and the story from Matthew are powerful in their own way, but I so far I haven't been able to synthesize them satisfactorily.

In Genesis Jacob is returning home to reconcile with his brother Esau. Jacob has lived in exile, but he also has become a prosperous man with many herds and wives. As he approaches he sends gifts ahead to Esau to perhaps appease his anger. In this little excerpt though, the focus is not on the feud but on the struggle that Jacob has and continues to face. Who is Jacob's opponent? Is this the same "man" that appeared to Abraham and foretold Sarai's pregnancy with Isaac? Is this in fact God with whom Jacob wrestles? Why would God wrestle with Jacob?

I like this story because it reminds me of how many times I have wrestled with God, as well as with myself. God calls, I resist. God calls again, I relent, then I resist. God calls again, and I surrender my will, but then I resist again. For Jacob this encounter is a standoff, although there is the last blow that the Wrestler sneaks in to maim Jacob. But sometimes when I wrestle with myself (or with the Temptor) there is the same result – I resist, then I relent, then I reform, then I resist, then relent again, and then reform. I am reminded of the cartoon devil and angel that sit on opposite shoulders of one of the characters who is tempted to do some act that is not a clear cut yes or no.

Jacob's encounter with the Wrestler reminds me that I (we) are constantly wrestling with problems, with temptations, with irritations, and so many other things. We wrestle instead of relenting. We resist instead of accepting. The Wrestler doesn't relent but continues the match. Ignatius in his revealed spirituality discovered the peace that comes from Suscipe, the ultimate relenting of the wrestling match and accepting the will of the Wrestler.

Jesus reveals his deep compassion in the excerpt from Matthew. He is "moved with pity for [the diseased and ill of every kind] because they were troubled and abandoned." Why would people abandon other people who are in their own community? Why would those who have the means to alleviate the suffering of their diseased and ill sisters and brothers not do so of their own volition? Why would people question the motives of the healer, and ascribe to Him some darker purpose or force, instead of accepting the purity of His generosity?

Over the decades that I have observed the debate over both the individual's and society's roles in caring for the diseased, ill, troubled and abandoned, these nagging questions have always been in my mind. Why does society seemingly abandon members who are suffering? Why does the government, the electorate, the people not take a more active role in helping? Should it and they?

It seems to me that if we in fact believe what Jesus taught and lived and espoused and gave His life for, we individually should be able to say yes when the diseased, ill, troubled and abandoned need help. However, it also seems to me that acting collectively to address these problems ultimately is more effective than only acting individually, that fixing the root causes eliminates much more of the

suffering than lovingly easing the pain of one person. It seems to me that Jesus is calling us to be in a partnership with each other and with Him to be shepherds to these troubled ones in our midst.

And perhaps this is the synthesis I have been searching for – the wrestling that takes place is between our call to act and our complacency and risk-aversion to action. Perhaps we see the care of these people as someone else's problem rather than our own opportunity to share God's love with them. Perhaps we don't want to get involved because it forces us to confront poverty and illness and abandonment issues that we would rather ignore. Perhaps we rationalize drawing a distinction between helping the person in front of us and social forces that have combined to create situations that put the person in need of assistance.

And so my prayer today is for the grace of generous surrender to the Wrestler, and for the strength to act individually and to encourage others to act collectively to be Jesus' partner in shepherding my troubled and abandoned sisters and brothers.

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