

July 23, 2017. The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 11 A

Working with church youth can be lots of fun, and quite useful for your own spiritual edification. Let me share with you a little snippet I remembered this week while “pondering” this Genesis lesson from the Hebrew Canon of the Bible.

I remember, years ago, helping to lead a diocesan weekend youth retreat in Utah. The retreat’s theme had something to do with The Beattitudes. It was meant to instill a sense of mission into these Middle Schoolers’ budding Christian faith. The kids & leaders were divided into smaller groups, and each group got a “Blessed are the...” statement, and we had all night to, somehow, experience it. It was up to us to flesh out the experience.

Our group received the theme: “**Blessed are the poor...**” And, after some discussion, we decided that, since most of the world’s poor slept on the cold, hard floor, we would do the same that night. That’s fine for 14-year-olds. *But...* it was more of a challenge for a 40-year-old who had had spinal arthritis since *my* teenage years, and multiple sclerosis for the past 5! And, though my nicely-cushioned, full-recline power wheelchair *really was* quite comfy, I was committed to their way of doing things.

I had done quite a bit of hiking and camping in my younger days, so I didn’t think it would affect me too much. But, it was hard. (Pardon the pun.) That night, I could never get comfortable. I woke up often. I had a hard time getting back to sleep. My hips hurt. My shoulder blades hurt. The back of my head hurt. My whole spine ached... Trying to sleep on a cold, hard concrete parish hall floor... with Middle Schoolers— Was I crazy?

But, maybe the worst part was that I felt the effects throughout the next two days. I realized when I was writing this, that it sounded like it was a bad thing. In retrospect, it wasn’t. I actually *tried* to use the pain I felt all day to repeat our theme, “blessed are the poor.” If nothing else, the discomforts of that night helped keep that verse in my thoughts repeatedly. And, as I returned back home, to Vernal, out in the “Oil Patch”, where and when its boom-and-bust cycle had flat-lined, it helped me lift the poor in prayer and in assistance, and to feel differently toward them. From then, on out. Sleeping with “blessed are the poor” had become a blessing to me. With every throb and wincing joint I was reminded of God’s blessing ***of feeling some solidarity with the poor***. And whom God blessed.

So, when I read that Jacob laid down one night and cuddled up with a rock...it takes me back and makes me wonder...how well did **he** sleep that night? And, for how much of the following day and week did he ‘feel’ it. Did it help infuse the following day, and week, and month, and lifetime with the memory of the life changing events of the night’s dream of a giant ladder, angels, and the blessing uttered upon him by none other than the Lord God, Himself? Did that rock help *him* with a constant reminder of his life-changing dream? Could his *pain* help him feel the blessing of God in his joints, and shoulder blades, and skull? Maybe.

For on this night he saw angels. And he heard the voice of God, as his forebears had before him—and as his son Joseph would in dreams—and as his distant descendent Moses *eventually* would in a burning bush. God reminded him of God's relationship with his father and grandfather. God reminded Jacob that He would bless the world through him. God told him that his family would be as numerous as the tiny flecks of dust of the earth.

Wow, what a statement. There, lying on the dust of the ground, perched on a rock, Jacob was told that his family would be like dust. They would be everywhere. God's blessing would fall like dust. Like dew. Covering... *all*. And God would never leave Jacob. Wherever Jacob went, God would be with him.

As he awoke from his slumber, Jacob picked himself off of the dust of the ground. And—surely—still feeling the spot on his skull where his head met the earth for the night, he realized that he was near the House of God—(in Hebrew: Beth El)—and by God's gate. And there Jacob put up a pillar —another rock— to signal to anyone else who would stumble by that spot that they were on holy ground.

I'm struck by the earthiness of this passage. This blessing **wasn't** ethereal. It was a blessing born on a rock-and-a-hard-place. A blessing of dust. More rocks piled high. It was a blessing of families, babies—children, young and old, generations growing into mothers and fathers who would be blessed with more children. Until the world was covered with the dust of God's blessing and favor. It *almost* makes me want to sleep on the floor again tonight...to better remember....God's blessing, and whom He blesses....To remember each and every Beth-el along the path of my *own* life.

This reminds me of another time in Jacob's life, of a night we *won't* hear in this year's lectionary cycle, because the Feast of the Transfiguration falls on that Sunday, and will take this reading's place.

You remember the story, though, —of a night when, at a river's edge, Jacob struggled with a man —an angel —really, *God*— until dawn. And the angel put Jacob's hip out of joint —*and also blessed Jacob*— so that Jacob would always remember struggling with God in the darkest of hours. The old rabbinical *midrash* says that Jacob, henceforth, limped throughout life, to always remember struggling with God —and prevailing! He named the place *Peniel* —the Face of God.

Left Jacob with a forever limp —as a blessing to remember. Funny blessing, huh...? What does this tell us about the nature of God's blessing? When God blesses you, blesses me, what does it look like? When God blesses us, do we feel it in our bones?

—Father Glen Gleaves