

"What's Needed"
Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21
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It's so good to be back.

To be back in town and back in my study,
and especially back in the pulpit.

Being able to go away long enough
to really know what you miss

is an incredible privilege, and I missed
wrestling with the word on my own behalf and yours.

August 30 will be the 25th anniversary of my ordination,
and in that time you are the only church
who have gifted me with a sabbatical.

I will never be able to thank you enough.

Because of you, Rob and I went many places that give us life:
national parks and historic sites in six different states,
plays and art galleries and museums in New York City.

We saw sights and heard music that filled our souls,
and we spent precious time in Atlanta with our sweet Henley,
the most marvelous grand baby ever born,
and with our son and daughter
as we celebrated 40 years of marriage.

There were lots of God-filled moments.

Getting a better sense of the sheer size of the United States
was powerful all by itself.

Then there was the immensity and grandeur of the western mountains,
still fiercely pushing up from the earth.

At Grand Tetons National Park a Broadwinged hummingbird
zoomed up from a valley below

and hovered a few feet in front of my face
for what seemed like an eternity, clearly looking me over.

Now I know why so many people
associate hummingbirds with angelic visitations.

It snowed in Yellowstone a few days after we arrived,
so we got to see that incredible landscape

as it looks wearing spring green and covered in winter white.

A favorite moment was seeing a huge white pelican fly in slow motion
through flakes of snow to land on a silver lake.

While I took a break from my calling,

I did not take a break from the world.

If anything, had even *more* time to read and reflect
on the news in the past three months.

Several times during my break I wondered
what I might have preached in response to some events.

Now that I'm back it seems very fitting that the Matthew text begins
with Jesus hoping to get away by himself
to absorb the news that his cousin John
has been murdered at the hand of King Herod.
Jesus needs to reflect and perhaps seek his own healing
after what must have been frightening, painful news.
But he can't for long. The crowds find out where he is
and overwhelm him with their own needs.
Ever compassionate and loving,
he sets about giving the people what's needed.
We know the story of the feeding of the five thousand well.
In fact, it is one of those stories we know so well
that it's hard to fully grasp the scene.
I hope you noted there were five thousand men,
so with women and children the crowd-size at *minimum*
was Tech's 10,000-seat Cassell Colosseum times two.

The key moment is the moment when the day ought to be done,
when the healing and teaching are over
and it's time for rest and a meal.
The disciples assume that everyone will disperse
and take care of themselves.
But Jesus startles them by saying no,
"They need not go away. *You* give them something to eat."
With these words we've just plunged through a time tunnel.
The disciples who were there on that day fade from view.
Jesus is speaking directly to us, the church
in every time and place.
"You give the hungry and hurting, the ones who seek healing,
you, the church in every age, you give them what's needed.
You give them something to eat."

Wait a minute.
Don't church folks come here to get what we need?
Why on earth would he be telling us,
to meet the world's impossible needs?
I mean, I don't know about you,
but I'm kind of a wreck about what's happening out there
in my own nation, much less in the rest of the world.
About crude language and behavior as a new political norm;
about people stuffed into trucks and left to die;
houses of worship targeted by suicide bombers,
the KKK marching just down the road
and counter-protesters erupting in violence?
"Come on, Jesus, get real!" part of me wants to complain.
"What's this about us doing what's needed for others
when we want so much to be fed!"
Meanwhile in Genesis Jacob has troubles of his own.
He's on the run from his brother Esau

whose blessing he stole many years ago.

It was not just nice words from dad, that blessing.

It was the birthright a father gives oldest child,
the gift of God's grace and favor.

Jacob, the schemer deprived Esau of it through cruel deceit.

Now after years the blessing has borne fruit:

Jacob is a wealthy man with a large family
and many flocks and herdsmen.

But he's about to run into Esau's 400 men
whom he fears plan to attack him.

Jacob divides his household up so that if the worst comes
at least some of Jacob's family might survive.

Like Jesus in his time of distress, Jacob seeks solitude.

Like Jesus, he doesn't get it.

There is a presence in his camp,
introduced by the word "and," nothing more.

"Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."

What? That makes no sense.

It makes no sense at all until the stranger gives Jacob
another blessing and a new start in the form of a new name.

Suddenly Jacob knows the man he's been wrestling with all night was God
and that God has been with him all along

despite his theft and his scheming and deceptions.

God was and is with him, and with us,
giving what's needed then and now.

Both these stories promise that outside circumstances,
no matter how grim, won't get in the way of God's actions.

God's presence and gifts can flow through us
as they flow through Jesus to feed the crowds,
as they flow through Jacob to ensure his future.

Letting God's gifts flow through us, the church,
is our calling as people of God.

Pastor Mark Tidsworth calls it "sacred partnering"

in his book, SHIFT, about being the Church in the 21st century.

He also calls it "joining God's mission to the world."ⁱ

Tidsworth says that there're three questions
churches need to be asking:

- What does it mean today to be disciples of Jesus Christ?
- What does it mean to be the *gathered community* of disciples? and
- What does it mean to be a gathered community of disciples
who join God's mission in the world?

Speaking to the Church by the sea that day long ago

Jesus put it this way: "You give them something to eat,"

It's what the church exists for.

To proclaim the grace and love that is ours in all times and places,
the hard places, the scary nights, and on the joyous feast days,
the days of celebration; in times of rest and sabbath,
on anniversaries and birthdays when all we want to do
is give thanks *and* on days when the news is unreadable
and all we really want is to go off by ourselves
because what's in front of us seems to be too hard to bear.

We the Church are the gathered disciples of Jesus Christ,
and there is a nonsense phrase attached to our every moment:
a sentence that reads "You are alone *and* there is a man
wrestling with you until daybreak."

As I hope and pray you have heard by now,
in this year of the 500 hundredth anniversary of the Reformation,
we're using Mark Tidsworth's book SHIFT
to invite each other to wrestle with God until we get a blessing.
We're gonna wrestle with God and come away changed.

We'll read scripture and reflect together in small groups,
using a SHIFT small group format as a guide.
Some of the groups will meet on Sunday mornings.
Some on Wednesday nights,
Everyone who wants to take part
can choose the meeting time that works the best for you.
If you pick Wednesday then you can eat dinner in the bargain
and there will be activities for kids.

I have been so impressed by what the Equipping Team
has done this summer to spread the word.
The welcome window in the Gathering Space offers a booklet [HOLD UP]
with most of what's already been shared about SHIFT:
In here are the letters that were mailed to everyone last spring,
the three sermons I preached in Lent,
even a frequently asked questions page at the back.
A number of people have bought or borrowed Tidsworth's book.
That's perfect because in every church there
some folks want to read and understand everything they can,
and some folks who are comfortable taking part
without needing a lot of information up front,
and some who prefer to observe from afar.
Fifty people have already committed to being in a SHIFT group.
Between now and when the groups begin to meet in September
there might well be fifty more.

God can no doubt work through the SHIFT groups
to bless the *whole* church; we'll all be
named, fed, changed, amazed by the miraculous wonders
God bestows on us all the time without limit,
and seeks to give to the world through us.
Because as I said in a sermon last spring

letting God work through us is *not* a task or a burden.
It's a release from the exhaustion of being our own God,
and an invitation to life in a garden of grace
where we care for each other and partner with God
to care for the whole world.

A minute ago I mentioned the Klu Klux Klan rally in Charlottesville in July
that ended in violence.

This Saturday an alt-right group called Unite the Right
plans to demonstrate in Charlottesville's Emancipation Park.

Organizer Jason Kessler, who refers to himself
as a "a pro-white activist-journalist,"
has invited incendiary speakers to address the crowd
and a motorcycle gang to "provide security"

Faith leaders in Charlottesville have put out a call for
a thousand clergy to come to Charlottesville next Saturday.

"We need your help," their message says.

"We don't have the numbers
to stand up to this on our own."ⁱⁱ

Last week white supremacist Kessler sneered to the press:

"Most of these so-called "faith leaders are from Unitarian churches
that don't even believe in God. They're open Communists
disguising their political activity in a veneer of religiosity.

They're scam artists and should have
their IRS tax exemption revoked."ⁱⁱⁱ

Charming guy, huh?

Rob and I are going to go, not to prevent the Jason Kessler's of the world
from spewing hate. A bunch of people in clerical collars and stoles
won't have any impact on them at all.

But Kessler's ugly rhetoric is meant to attract
a big crowd of watchers on various media.

So we will go because hate has no bread to offer,
no cup to slack the hurting world's thirst.

Because hate has already failed, and will always fail.

And because Jesus tells the Church

"You give them something to eat." AMEN.

ⁱ Mark Tidsworth, *SHIFT, Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church*, Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015, pp 2-3.

ⁱⁱ From an email sent by Congregate Charlottesville, and signed by Brittany Caine-Conley, Lead Organizer of Congregate C'ville and MID at Sojourners UCC, Charlottesville, VA and Rev. Seth Wispelwey, Consulting Organizer of Congregate C'ville and Directing Minister of Restoration Village Arts.

ⁱⁱⁱ I found Kessler's quote in a news article posted by Charlottesville news station NBC29. For the full article:

<http://www.nbc29.com/story/36013931/congregate-charlottesville-calling-plan-for-interfaith-response-to-unite-the-right-rally>