

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

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Lambeth conference ends today. Their discussions over many issues must have seemed to the bishops like the wrestling match between Jacob and the unnamed man in the Old Testament reading this morning.

This reading is shrouded in so many questions. Who is this man fighting Jacob? If it is God, why can't Jacob be easily defeated? Why does the stranger have to leave by morning? If it's a demon, why does Jacob ask for a blessing and why does he accept a new name from him? Is this man an angel, a thief, Jacob's brother Esau? The story isn't clear.

What we do know is Jacob, much like the bishops at Lambeth, are concerned over their imminent meeting with their brother. In the past, Jacob and Esau haven't exactly had a "Hallmark card" relationship. They've literally been fighting since they were in the womb. Similarly, the Anglican communion has had differences with race, gender, and now sexual orientation. However, just like the story of Jacob's fight on the riverbank, the church comes through the fray blessed, even if there is a limp. As we struggle to meet our brothers and sisters on common ground, we must wrestle before we can receive God's blessing. Our earthly schemes can be crippled if we view God as an opponent. When we see the face of God in our lives, then the blessings begin.

It's fear that keeps us in this wrestling match. Jacob feared his meeting with Esau and in the Gospel this morning the disciples fear their inability to feed the crowds.

Jesus wanted to take some time to be alone with God. He wanted some down-time, some me-time. Yet, here comes the crowds and instead of feeling stressed, overwhelmed, angry, Jesus feels compassion for them. When they had to be fed, the disciples looked to the local village and said, "send them that way!" but Jesus takes a few fish and loaves of bread and what does he do? He looks up. HE LOOKS TO GOD FIRST, and the miracle flows from there.

Now, we need to remember here that in Jewish culture "you are what you eat" is a very literal term. Kosher law does allow for most grain and fish to be eaten. Both are considered "parve" (parva). However, the idea, "you are who you eat with" is not as easily dismissed. We are told 5,000 men were fed, not counting women and children. We won't go there today! I highly doubt that every one of those people were in the same social class. Yet, they ate, and were filled. They released their earthly fear, and moved beyond, accepting the bread from Jesus.

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Well, sort of. Because while Jesus did provide, the disciples were the ones who distributed the food and cleaned up. As followers of Christ, we need to distribute the Good News and clean up our fearful ways. We need to combine raising our eyes to heaven first, just as Jesus did, and then ...get to work! To use a term from Jerry Gobel, a worker for Family Outreach in Washington DC, we need to move from "vertical prayer to horizontal action".

Lambeth conference had a full plate, there is no doubt. And I would hazard a guess that some of the bishops are walking with a spiritual limp of sorts. But in the end, the Anglican communion has a purpose illustrated in the Millennium Development Goals. Because one billion people live on less than \$1.00 a day, we must find a way, as a global church, to eradicate extreme poverty. Because one in three women are victims of gender based violence, we must empower women worldwide and promote gender equality. Through our own conscious effort to ensure environmental sustainability, the one billion people who lack access to drinkable water can quench their thirst and grow their crops. We can stand up against violence, embrace people of all lifestyles and give them a place in the church; our church. We have to stop wasting our energy on fear and look up. I'd like to share a prayer by Brian McLaren who recently spoke at Lambeth. It's called the "Jesus Creed."

*We have confidence in Jesus who healed the sick, the blind and the paralyzed and even raised the dead.*

*He cast out evil powers and confronted corrupt leaders. He cleansed the temple, he favored the poor, he turned water into wine, walked on water, calmed the storm.*

*He died for the sins of the world, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father, sent the Holy Spirit.*

*We have confidence in Jesus who taught in word and example sign and wonder. He preached parables of the kingdom of God on hillsides, from boats, in the temple, in homes, at banquets, and parties, along the road, on beaches, in towns, by day and by night.*

*He taught the way of love for God and neighbor, for stranger, enemy, for outcast and alien.*

*We have confidence in Jesus who called disciples, led them, gave them new names and new purpose, and sent them out to preach the good news.*

*He washed their feet as servant, he walked with them, ate with them, called them friends, rebuked them, encouraged them, promised to leave and then return, and promised to be with them always.*

*He taught them to pray. He rose early to pray, stole away to desolate places, fasted and faced agonizing temptations, wept in a garden and prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done". He rejoiced, he sang, he feasted, he wept.*

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*We have confidence in Jesus so we follow him, learn his ways, seek to obey his teaching and live by his example. We walk with him, walk in him, abide in him, as a branch in a vine.*

*We have not seen him, but we love him. His words are to us words of eternal life, and to know him is to know the true and living God. We do not see him now, but we do have confidence in Jesus.*

*Amen.*

I don't know about you, but I've lost count of the number of action verbs in that prayer. Being a Christian is not about looking at a difficult circumstance and asking, "Why won't God help?" Being a Christian means looking at the same circumstances and praying for strength to help! That doesn't mean we all have to be missionaries, it doesn't mean we have to live a sparse, monastic life, although some choose those paths.

I think to be a Christian in this world, this community, this church means to first realign our religion and our lives to that Someone that we seek when we do look up.

We DO have confidence in Jesus. We put aside time to spend with our God, knowing as the psalm tells us this morning when you call upon God, God will hear your words and answer. Sometimes the answer is no.

So, we may wrestle with God. We may come away with a permanent limp. That's ok. Because in that struggle between our will and God's will, we are blessed with the strength to meet our brothers and sisters and offer them the Gospel message that brings reconciliation, transformation and hope.

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