

“This is a Blessing?”  
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy  
Jeremiah 31.27-34  
Genesis 32.22-31  
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Our last night in Ireland a group of five of us sat around the table for dinner in a pub. One of my colleagues said “Let’s send ourselves off with an Irish blessing.” I won’t say the whole blessing here but the general idea was that if disagree with us and refuse to change that God will break their ankles so that we can recognize our enemies by their limps. Knowing many friends with physical disabilities this theology didn’t sit well with me, so I asked “Does this mean the physically disabled are our enemies? Does this mean that they are disabled because they cannot be redeemed? Does this mean that God is the one that disables people?” I’m quite good at starting lighthearted dinner discussions. With this group of pastors that I knew well, we immediately dove into a deep theological conversation.

Of course enemies are not spotted by disability. This blessing, which after some googling I realized was considered a curse in Ireland, says more about humanity than it does about God. And while this curse is attributed to the Irish, I think it can be found in any culture. When someone doesn’t see our way we ask God to change them. We want God to make *them* understand. We believe that we are in the right and they must be the ones that repent. And if they don’t, then we may not want God to break their legs but we surely want some sort of revenge or proof of our rightness. We find this in the psalms. Many of the psalmists would talk about their enemies and how God granted victory over their enemies. I think we find this in our own culture, as well.

This curse led me to two questions. One was how do we disagree with one another and the other was what is our theology of disability? To the first, I think the state of our world and our country shows our response to disagreements isn’t healthy. We could go from name calling to bashing candidates to campaign smears and escalate to wars before we know it.

I’m giving you just a few stories from my trip to Ireland, perhaps because it is still fresh in my memory. The purpose of my travel there was to learn about conflict transformation. We learned about Irish history and the context of the Troubles. We listened to people who had fought or who had been affected by the Troubles. We met people who lost loved ones in the Bloody Sunday attack. If you don’t know these references, that’s ok – I didn’t know much about Irish history before this year. I’ll talk more about it at my presentation. What is important to know is that the Irish know trauma and violence and disagreement. They live this every day. One of the things someone on our trip said was that we need to improve the quality of our disagreements. I have thought quite a bit about this. In many ways I do believe that we have to learn how to disagree. Taking our ball and going home doesn’t work. Screaming and name-calling doesn’t work. Wishing the worst on our enemies isn’t helpful.

Our group of pastors had many conversations about what we could disagree about and how we could still stand by our values. What do you value most? In a disagreement what do you stand firmly about and what are you willing to give in about? Perhaps part of conflict

transformation is learning about ourselves more than others. When do we know it is our neighbor who needs to have a change of heart, and when are we the ones who need to change?

Jacob is in a fight in the scripture passage that we read today. He's really an interesting character. He's the son of Isaac who was the son of Abraham. Jacob lives a life fraught with conflict. His older twin brother was Esau. Jacob's name means supplanter, or usurper. This is really accurate for him because he came out of the womb holding Esau's heel and then continues to seize every opportunity he can, even those perhaps he should not.

Jacob wanted the family land and family blessing. His mother helped him to obtain it. In that time and culture the first born son inherited everything, so Isaac's property would have gone to Esau. Together, Isaac's wife and Jacob tricked Isaac into thinking Jacob was Esau. Jacob usurped the land. Because of this Jacob and Esau fought for many years. Jacob is often in the wrong but he is the one that the Bible follows.

Early one morning Jacob and his family leave and begin a long journey. Jacob runs into a man and they wrestle all night. The man strikes Jacob in the hip and Jacob refuses to stop fighting without a blessing. The man blesses him and called him Israel, meaning Jacob has fought with God and with humans and prevailed.

We are left with more questions than answers. We don't know exactly who this man was or why Jacob had to wrestle him, but we assume he is sent by God. Is the limp a blessing or a curse? How do we see disability in our own world? For those who are in physical and mental pain how can we even classify this as a blessing? For those for whom the disability is not painful except for social isolation created by community, can we see a disability as a gift of diversity?

My mother is a sign language interpreter and I grew up with members of the Deaf community visiting us often. For the people that I knew they didn't wish to have hearing. Their disability wasn't a burden to them. What they wished was for more social inclusion. They wanted better understanding of their community and for others to learn American Sign Language. Did God make them Deaf? Did they see it as a blessing?

I've preached before on the term blessing because often our understanding of a blessing is tied into having privilege. When we say we are blessed because of food or housing or basic necessities we are making the implication that those without are cursed. These are basic human needs that everyone should receive. We do not know the nature of Jacob's blessing. What we don't read here is that later on he reunites with his brother Esau. They see each other from far away and greet each other with open arms. It's a happily ever after story. Though, there was much work that went into that moment.

It is important to recognize Jacob's name change. Names are very important in the Bible, especially in Hebrew. God changes the name of many people to represent a transformation that they make in life. Here Jacob becomes Israel. When I was in Northern Ireland we stayed at a retreat center called Corrymeela. This was a space that was considered neutral in which people in conflict could come together and have a conversation. When this center was created they had heard that the Irish word for this land on which they built, Corrymeela, meant place of unity.

They thought this was the perfect name for what they were trying to do in the community. But they later found out maybe 10 or 15 years later was at the Irish word, Corrymeela, actually meant lumpy crossing place. It was literally describing the uneven ground. Yet, as they did more and more conversations about conflict they realized it was fitting. It was where people from different places, from different sides of the argument could meet and be transformed, and that road was lumpy and curvy, and never clear. It is a place for people to have a shared future, even when their past is broken.

The people in Jeremiah look forward to a new future. We read about how the people had plucked up and broke down and overthrew and destroyed. In a time of exile and war and famine they have been isolated and lonely and unsure of their future. God tells them that God will create out of the chaos. At the same time, we cannot glorify the struggles that people go to in order to arrive at the happily ever after. One of the things we talked about at Corrymeela was the concept of peace. We could've talked about peace for days. It is never complete. It is never fulfilled. It is built upon small progressions and deeper understanding of one another. It is built on having better disagreements.

A couple weeks before election day I probably don't have to ask you with whom you might disagree. With the stress of humanity amidst the pandemic and as more and more responsibilities are piled upon people I don't have to ask where the tensions lie. I know that they are there and I know that they are pulling people and stretching them thin. For those who are just surviving it can be difficult to even gather the courage and energy to manage. How can we disagree better when we are simply making it day by day?

And yet that is our hope. Because we are human and because we will fail, we rely on God the One who redeems us, the One who transforms us so that we can have better disagreements and begin to transform the world a little at a time.

I pray that you can take time this week to center and focus on God and turn off all the demands of the world. I pray that you can turn off the news long enough that you can focus on inner transformation, but not so long that you forget about the hurting world. I pray that you are transformed within so that you may feel rejuvenated to make a small change in the world fraught with conflict. It is only through God that we can do this. Amen