

The Crossing

[Genesis 32:22-31](#)

[Psalms 17:1-7,16](#)

[Romans 9:1-5](#)

[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Julia Watts Belser is a disability theologian, a rabbi, and a scholar at Georgetown. In her book *Loving Our Own Bones*, she writes about a summer when her body changed in ways she could not control. She has cerebral palsy, and for years she had been able to walk, slowly, carefully, with effort, but she could pass. She could move through the world without being immediately, visibly marked as disabled. And then the pain became too much. Walking cost her more than it gave her. So she made a decision: she got a scooter.

She describes this as one of the most significant crossings of her life. She gave up the ability to pass. She became visibly, unmistakably disabled in every room she entered. The marking was permanent and public. And what she gained was her life back... freedom from pain, freedom to move, freedom to be fully present in her own body and her own work. Her options expanded. Her capacity to live out her calling grew. She became more herself. But she would never again move through the world unmarked.

The blessing came through the crossing. The freedom came through the wound. I've been sitting with that image all week because I think it is the story our texts are telling us today, every single one of them, and it is a harder, more honest, story than we usually let it be.

Jacob is on the run. He has spent his entire life in frenetic motion, grappling with his brother, fleeing his father-in-law, brokering between wives, grabbing and grasping and negotiating his way through the world. And now, the night before he is supposed to meet Esau for the first time in twenty years, he sends everyone ahead and waits alone in the dark. ... And someone, the text won't tell us exactly who, begins to wrestle with him.

This is not a polite encounter. They wrestle until daybreak. Jacob will not let go. His opponent, unable to prevail, strikes him at the hip socket and throws it out of joint, and still Jacob holds on. When asked his name, he answers honestly for perhaps the first time in his life. Jacob. The supplanter. The grasper. The one who has been pretending to be someone he isn't since the day he put on his brother's clothes and deceived his blind father. *Jacob*. And then his name is changed. No longer Jacob. Now Israel. One who strives with God. He names the place Peniel, Face of God, because he has seen God and survived. And yet he walks away limping. The limp is not the price he paid for the blessing. The limp is the mark of the encounter that gave it to him. You cannot have one without the other. The crossing made him. The wound and the blessing are the same event.

Paul understands this. In Romans 9 he writes something almost unbearable, that he has unceasing anguish in his heart, that he could wish himself cut off from Christ, accursed, if it would help his people receive what he knows they are missing. He is describing a man broken open by love. Not broken despite his faith. Broken because of it. The closer he gets to Christ, the more he feels the cost of that proximity. The blessing and the wound are, again, the same event.

And then there is the psalmist, demanding to be seen by God. "Let my vindication come from your presence". Then, in the end he says, "at my vindication I shall see your face, when I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness". He trusts that *seeing God's face* is itself the reward, whatever it costs.

And then there is Jesus, on the day the feeding happens. Matthew tells us that Jesus had just received word that John the Baptist was dead, his cousin beheaded on a whim at a party, his head brought in on a platter. Jesus tried to withdraw. He got in a boat and went to a deserted place to grieve. And the crowd followed him. Five thousand people, not counting women and children, waiting on the shore when he arrived.

He did not send them away. He healed their sick. And when it grew late and the disciples suggested dismissing everyone to find their own food, Jesus said: *you give them something to eat.* ... They had five loaves and two fish. They were thinking about what was in their hands, but Jesus was thinking about something else entirely.

He took their bread. He looked up to heaven; blessed it, broke it, gave it to the disciples, and the disciples gave it to the crowds, and everyone ate, and there were twelve baskets left over. Jesus was already broken by grief when he got off that boat. Then he took what was in his hands and broke it further. And that offering became enough for everyone.

This is the pattern. Not despite, but through. Not around, but by means of. The disciples wanted to solve the problem with what was currently in their hands. Jesus took what was currently in their hands, broke it, and made it into something their imaginations couldn't fathom. They were still learning, as we are still learning, that the provision of the kingdom cannot be measured by what we can currently see or hold or count.

Julia Watts Belser didn't choose the deterioration. She chose how to receive it. She chose to stop spending her energy on passing and start spending it on living. She chose the mobility device. And in that choosing, something that had been locked became available. She became more of who she was made to be, and she became marked in the process. The marking and the freedom arrived together.

Jacob didn't choose the stranger in the dark. But he chose to hold on. He chose to demand a blessing rather than let go and walk away unmarked and unchanged. Jacob was a mess; fighting everyone from the womb, lying his way through half his life, but he knew that God's presence and God's blessing were worth reaching for, whatever it cost. And it cost him his hip. He walked into the rest of his life limping, he named the place where it happened the Face of God, and he never forgot what he had seen there.

We want the blessing without the limp. We want the bread multiplied without the breaking. We want to be conduits of God's provision, and we are, genuinely, heirs of a promise so vast it cannot be measured, but we imagine we can distribute it without being broken open ourselves. We want the treasure without the crossing.

But look at what happens when someone chooses otherwise. Look at what five loaves and two fish become when they are placed in the hands of someone willing to break them. Look at what a man running from his whole life becomes when he stops running and holds on until daybreak. Look at what a woman in pain becomes when she stops spending her energy on passing and starts spending it on presence.

The question our texts are asking us this morning is not whether we believe the treasure is real. Most of us believe that. The question is whether we are willing to receive it the way it actually comes, through the wrestling, through the breaking, through the crossing that marks us permanently on the other side.

What is it in our lives that we have been trying to receive without the limp? What blessing are we holding at arm's length because the crossing toward it looks like loss? ... Jacob walked away from Peniel limping and more fully himself than he had ever been. He finally knew his own name. He had finally seen the face of the one he had been running toward and away from his whole life. The wound and the gift were the same.

We follow a God who did not distribute life from a safe distance, who took on a body, broke it, and fed the whole world from it. He broke death itself and then fed the world with new life. He showed us, once and for all, that blessing does not flow around brokenness. It flows through it. In a moment we will participate in that gift as we take it into ourselves at the altar and then we will leave this building and have an opportunity to watch it multiply, if we allow it to be broken in us and then shared.

May we be willing to be marked. May we hold on until daybreak. May we have the grace to discover, limping, that we have seen the face of God, and that it was worth the crossing.