

Guest Speaker Georgeanne Bennett

FCC Sermon, 8-2-20, Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 10:14:13-21

Lynne Cox was just 17 when she had an encounter with the ocean in the waters of Southern California. Lynne was already an accomplished open water swimmer, having swum the English Channel at 15. She trained virtually every day of the year, swimming for hours in any and all weather.

On this particular day in March, with the water temperature in the mid-50's, she had plans for later in her day, so she had started swimming at 5 am, in the velvet-y dark. She begins her book, "Grayson", like this,

"There's something frightening, and magical, about being on the ocean, moving between the heavens and the earth, knowing that you can encounter anything on your journey. The stars had set. The sea and sky were inky black, so black I could not see my hands pulling water in front of my face, so black there was no separation between the sea and the sky."

In that darkness, something changes. Lynne feels it first as a sort of fizzing energy, like the sea is electric, then she realizes that she is surrounded by baby anchovies, and that they are being chased by bigger fish; grunion. Thinking about the schooling anchovies and grunion, it occurs to her that they will probably be followed by tuna, and tuna are big and fast and powerful and often dangerous to swimmers.

Lynne moves closer to shore to get outside the potential line of tuna and tries to get back into her swimming routine. But as she does, something strange happens. All the fish disappear

and she feels something new and powerful in the water. The water begins to churn her up and down. There is something huge down below her, and she seems to be riding on top of a monstrous bubble. The hairs on her arms rise and she attempts to swim towards shore, but instead she slides into the hole in the water created by that hugeness coming up towards her.

Shark? That seems to Lynne to be a terrifying possibility. And whatever it is, it is dragging her along in its slipstream. Lynne is wrestling with her fears, but that's what she does. In order to do the long swims she trains for, she has to conquer her fear; giving up is just not an option. She can't depend on anyone else; on those long swims, there is always a companion boat following her, in case of disaster, but this day she is alone.

In the Scripture from Genesis, Jacob is also alone. And wrestling with his fear. Jacob has darn good reason to be afraid. He has been a liar and a cheat for much of his life and has profited hugely from it. With the connivance of his mother, Rebekah, he robbed his brother, Esau, of their father, Issac's blessing; the blessing given to a first-born son. When Esau vowed to kill him, he ran off to Rebekah's brother in search of a wife.

But as we see so often in the Hebrew Scriptures, God loves a trickster. Or, at least, God seems to rewards them. Or maybe it is just that God can use the most imperfect of us to do God's work. Jacob works for Rebekah's brother, Laban, greatly increasing Laban's flocks and earning two of his daughters as wives. After 20 years, Jacob wants to return to his home but

Laban refuses to give up any of his animals, so Jacob tricks his father-in-law, and beats feet back to his ancestral home, taking what he regards as his fair share of the flocks, along with his wives and his eleven sons and we-don't-know-how-many daughters because the Scriptures don't bother to record them.

So, in today's Scripture, Jacob is just millimeters away from meeting up with his brother, Esau. Esau who vowed to kill him 20 years before. Jacob has sent ahead oxen, donkeys, flocks and slaves, in hopes of appeasing Esau, and he has gotten the return message that Esau is coming to meet him. Bringing 400 men. Oops.

This is not looking good for the trickster. He sends his wives and children to safety and the Scripture says, "...Jacob was left alone". Isolated. Wrestling all night with...what?; "a man?", "an angel?", "God?". The words say he wrestled with a man, but the words are slippery. Jacob insists that he won't yield until he gets a blessing from the being, so he obviously thinks his opponent is at least some sort of deity.

And the blessing Jacob receives is a new name, Israel, meaning something like, "one who struggles with God AND with humans and prevails". But Jacob doesn't escape unharmed. He is struck on the hip and forever after, he goes through life limping.

We are living through a time right now when many of us are profoundly alone. We are isolated in our homes, looking forward to grocery-shopping, for heaven's sake, as a highlight of our weeks. An adventure, if a scary one, with dangers lurking

everywhere. Will the other shoppers be wearing masks? Will there be hand sanitizer? If we are lucky, we have friends or relatives who shop for us, and we look forward to a short visit, with masks and no touching, but at least human contact.

We are so hungry for the blessings of others. The blessing of touch. The blessing of worship, the way it used to be. The blessing of singing together. But that time of blessing may be far off and probably won't ever be like it was, "in the good old days".

Maybe we are wrestling with ourselves, wrestling with our idea of just who we are in the world. Maybe we need to be someone different. Someone who finds the courage to speak up and act up when we see injustice. Someone who gives up on the idea that our thoughts and our prayers will change anything unless our bodies and our votes out there fighting and getting into "good trouble", as John Lewis told us. We probably won't all get through this pandemic unchanged, but we WILL get through if we keep asking for and recognizing the blessings God gives us. Even if we end up limping a little.

Lynne Cox wrestles with her fear of whatever is in the water beneath her. Until, nearing the planned end of her training session, a friend on the pier shouts to her that she is being followed by a baby whale. Apparently the baby lost his mother and has been following Lynne for some time. Lynne guesses that the immense energy she felt beneath her earlier was the mother swimming by, and that the baby got distracted by Lynne while the mother went on. It is whale migration season, and the

gray whales are heading north to their feeding grounds in the Arctic.

Lynne gives up her plan of finishing this morning's easy, peasy swim and decides to stay with this 18 foot long, baby. Stay with him until he finds his mother. She gives him a name, "Grayson" and swims at least another five miles with him, out to an offshore oil rig and back, losing and re-finding him a couple of times.

Lynne is in, for her, absolutely uncharted waters. Her friends on-shore have notified lifeguard boats and they try to keep her in sight and warn other boaters in the area of her whereabouts, while also calling around to others who might have seen migrating whales that morning. She is one small person out on a big ocean. But she is a person with a mission. This baby will die if they can't find his mother. Lynne knows she can't stay in the water forever, but she keeps on, refusing to think about what will happen if she gives up.

Lynne is given many gifts during her exhausting swim. She had been sure that she knew the ocean, but on this day, she sees wonders she never dreamed of. Gardens of huge sunfish in the warmer waters around the oil rig and schools of dolphins who surround her with squeaking and joyful play. And Grayson, with whom she forges a very real bond.

In our Gospel passage for today, we hear Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand. Men, that is, five thousand men, because the writer didn't see fit to count the women and children. So, many more than five thousand. All of

the Gospel writers tell this story; apparently it was just too good to pass up. Jesus headed out that day looking for some solitude, some peace, but the crowd caught up with him, and, being Jesus, he went among them, touching and healing.

Now it is evening, and predictably, everyone is hungry. Jesus' disciples are overwhelmed, wrestling with the immensity of the need in front of them. They want Jesus to send the people away to find their own food. They want all that unmet need to just go away so they can forget about it. What can they do anyhow? There are SO many of them, and only twelve of the disciples, and oh, by the way, the only food around is five loaves of bread and two fish.

But, of course Jesus won't send the people away. He tells the disciples to work with what they have, namely those five loaves and two fish. He tells to take it one step at a time, always looking for the next right thing to do. He tells them to bring the bread and the fish to him and sit the people down in safe little socially distant groups. He blesses the food and breaks it up and tells the disciples to give it to the people. And somehow it works. What they thought was nothing becomes more than enough, becomes abundance. Somehow God provides what they need. Somehow God always provides what we need to help others.

God so often makes a way where there is no way. John Lewis entitled his memoir, "Walking With the Wind". The title comes from an incident that happened when John was a child. Sometime in the 1940's, John was playing with a group of his

cousins in the yard of his aunt's house in Alabama. In his words:

“[A]bout fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified...

Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside. Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin

roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.”

All working together. One step at a time, doing the next necessary thing, praying that God would make a way where there was no way.

The late, great theologian, Phyllis Tickle, had a theory that about every 500 years, the church has a huge shift, which she called a “rummage sale”. At these times, we begin to clean house, to open the windows to clear the air, and throw out all the junk we decide we don’t need anymore. At least by someone’s reckoning.

Tickle also surmised that the new age starting now will be the age of the Holy Spirit, when we learn to listen to God’s quiet voice and question all the rules and the dogma that have drive so many away from the church.

We might argue that this pandemic has taken WAY too much away from us, but we can’t deny that it has forced us to wrestle with just what is important to us.

On the day Lynne swam with whales, she decided to give over her will to the pull of the ocean. I believe that she turned herself over to the Holy Spirit. And was given gifts she could never have imagined.

May we do the same, trusting that God will make a way where there is no way, receiving the gifts we are given with joy.