

Sermon: Pentecost 22

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Year C

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Jacob wrestled with an angel... and is re-named Israel... which means... striven with God... 2 Timothy tells us to be persistent in proclaiming the message... Jesus told the disciples the meaning of the parable in advance... he told them not to lose heart... that they need to pray always... and isn't prayer a kind of striving... isn't prayer an opening up to that... which is more than we are...

Because if we're already whole and complete... then prayer would be superfluous... something we do because it looks good... something we do on street corners to draw attention to ourselves... but Israel doesn't only mean striving with God... it also means striving with humans... with each other... and Jacob strove with Laban... over Leah and Rachel... and with his brother Esau for his father's blessing... and now... in today's reading... Jacob is on his way home to make amends with his brother... he is prepared to make a gift of 550 animals... goats... rams... camels... cows... bulls... and donkeys... he is seeking justice for his brother... and reconciliation with him... but he is afraid of seeing Esau face to face... he is afraid of not being forgiven... but that night... he wrestled with God... and he saw God face to face... and out of the fear that can come in the dark... out of the terrors of the night... his life was preserved...

The widow in today's Gospel was seeking justice... and the Hebrew word for widow means... *one who has no voice*... her life is just as good as over... yet... she has the gift of desperation... we don't know whether she's an older woman whose husband has passed on... or perhaps she's a young mother with a mouth or two to feed... maybe her opponent has unjustly killed her husband... and now she seeks reparations so she doesn't have to resort to begging... or prostitution... but as John Shea wrote... her

voice is all she has... her only hope is that she keeps coming... persistence is not her fallback strategy... it is her only strategy...

And she must keep coming... because she deserves to be treated like a human being... and because she comes to a judge who has no fear of God... and no respect for anyone... she is vulnerable... aware of her predicament... perhaps like the outcast Samaritan who went back to thank Jesus for what was gift... she knows how the social systems of her time can work against her... and she cannot rely on those who have no respect for her... it doesn't matter whether this judge was appointed or elected... because he is a caricature... because in giving in to her... he avoids a tarnished reputation... because a judge who's supposed to give justice... doesn't want to be known for not giving justice... so the widow is using the little power she has... to fight injustice... her persistence becomes her prayer...

Now Jesus doesn't unravel the mystery of answered and unanswered prayer for us... he himself prayed that this cup might pass from him... but he says to pray constantly and not lose heart... knock and the door will be opened... seek and you will find... and prayer helps us realize... that the ways in which we participate in injustice are Legion... and his exhortation to pray constantly... is reflected in theologian Huston Smith's belief... that religion's role is to de-center the ego... and not pander to its desires...

Debie Thomas wrote in The Christian Century... the point of the parable is that God is **not** like the unjust judge... but is a loving and just God who does not delay... and who grants justice when her children cry out... the problem with this understanding is that too often... our lived experience doesn't bear this out... too often what we desire is delayed... too often... our most fervent prayers for healing... for justice... for peace... for joy... go unanswered... too often our experiences with prayer lead us to perceive God as an unjust judge... turned away from the urgency of our requests... for reasons we can't begin to fathom...

But perhaps the judge isn't God... perhaps this parable isn't about God at all... perhaps it's about us... about the state of our hearts... and the motivations behind our prayers... maybe what's at stake is not who God is... but who we are... and how we might fortify our spiritual lives through prayer... how we might put less value on doing... and more value on being... how we might learn to turn things over to the Holy Spirit... so that our circumstances... and we... can be healed by God...

Jacob wrestled with God... this ancient story says he was winning... so God dislocated his hip... wounded him... gave him a limp... too many in this country... in the public eye... in politics... want the world to see them as infallible... because we know what the world can do to those who are not... but the truth is... none of us are... God wounded all of us with some kind of limp... with some kind of wound that needs healing... or some kind of justice to fight for... and like the widow... some of us have the blessing of desperation... and so we wrestle with God... like Israel did... like the prophets did... and like the widow today...

But what issues do we wrestle with... is our focus individual or corporate... do we want more for ourselves or for everyone... do we want our voices to be heard or everyone's... do we want clean water in our backyards or in everyone's backyards... equal pay for ourselves or for everyone... do we wrestle until there's light... until we get healing justice not only for us... but until we get *Tikun Olam*... healing for the whole world...

The Gospel asks us... when the Son of Man comes... will he find faith on earth... we can ask... will he find justice on earth... and we don't know whether he will come before justice covers the whole earth... or not until it does... but in the mean time... I pray you... be kind... because everyone you know is facing some kind of battle... and I pray that we too... have the blessing of desperation...

Because through prayer... we can be changed in extraordinary ways... even when the thing for which we pray... does not come... because yes... unanswered prayer takes its toll... it hurts... it baffles... and it can break our hearts... but maybe that's the point of the parable too...

The work of being changed through prayer... so we can change the world... is hard work... and we need to ask the kinds of questions the widow asks... dare I risk humiliation one more time... do I still believe that my request is worth asking... can I be patient... am I still capable of trusting in the possibility of justice...

But even as the psalmist reminded himself... he reminds us... that the reason we can be persistent... is because God is persistent too...

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