

October 20, 2013

22nd Sunday After Pentecost Luke 18:1-8

We have as our Old Testament reading one of the strangest and perhaps most troubling passages in the Bible - the wrestling match between Jacob and God. You'll remember that this "man" or angel or some sort of divine being encounters Jacob when he is all alone. They fight all night long and neither can win. Only as daybreak approaches does the divine being injure Jacob. But Jacob still won't quit until he gets a blessing.

I think we can easily say that God is deliberately limiting his power in this wrestling match. God could have certainly overpowered Jacob at any time, but he didn't. Why? Probably to teach Jacob a lesson. That may not be the nicest way to learn a lesson, but I think we are okay with it. It gets tough when God permanently injures Jacob by striking him in the thigh. When we think of our loving and gracious God this does not seem to fit.

We have to remember though, that in those days having a limp was considered a sign of maturity. It was a sign that you had struggled and worked and probably fought. Walking with a

limp was a sign of the wisdom of experience. And that is just what dear old Jacob really needed.

You probably remember that Jacob was not the most upstanding of characters we meet in the Bible. In fact he was a scoundrel and a swindler. You'll remember that he had a twin brother - Esau. Now Esau was born first, which meant that Esau inherited everything and Jacob got nothing. But by means of trickery Jacob steals Esau's birthright. Esau isn't happy when this happens and vows to kill Jacob. Jacob begins what will become a pattern in his life and run away from trouble.

We discover that Jacob isn't the only one who is wily. After Jacob runs away from Esau he meets a pretty girl named Rachel. Jacob wants to marry Rachel but Rachel's father is wily too. Till all is said and done Jacob finds himself with two wives and their two female servants. These four women don't make life easy for Jacob. Well, any man who's trying to keep four women on the go at the same time is in deep trouble. But with enough lies, manipulation and distortions on everyone's part the family manages to function. Still though, Jacob's mode of operation is one of deceit and cowardice.

A few years later though Jacob learns that Esau is trying to find him, indeed has found him. Jacob is sure that Esau will kill him. True to his cowardly nature, Jacob sends presents to appease Esau. He also sends a couple waves of servants ahead and watches to see what Esau will do to them. Finally he puts his wives, children and all his possessions between himself and Esau. It appears that his plan is that if Esau kills his wives and children and destroys all his stuff then Jacob is in a good position to run away.

In our first reading it appears that God sees this little plot and decides it is time for Jacob to finally get some backbone. God does an end-run around all of Jacob's defenses and confronts him directly. There is the night-long wrestling match and of course no one wins. But something has certainly changed in Jacob beyond now having a limp. If we read onward we'd discover that, now limping and disabled, Jacob goes to meet his brother Esau face to face with nothing between them - helpless injured Jacob facing his brother Esau who is aided by a small army. Finally Jacob has done something right. As you may remember the story, Esau has long since forgiven Jacob. The brothers embrace and there is no fight.

Now let's not take from this story the idea that because Jacob has finally done what is right there is a happy ending. No, that is not the point. The point of the story is that wrestling match. Jacob and God struggle on and on and on. Neither gives in. Neither wins.

Let's keep that thought in mind and turn to our gospel reading about prayer. You probably know the parable of the unjust judge and the widow quite well. The powerless widow prevails against a corrupt and uncaring judge because of her persistence. Jesus says be similarly persistent in prayer and God, who is not like an unjust judge, but who is loving a gracious is sure to answer swiftly.

It's a great teaching, but how true do you find it in your lives? Have you ever prayed for something on and on and on and never gotten what you asked for? Perhaps it wasn't even a selfish prayer. Perhaps it was a prayer for someone else. I know many parents pray for faith to develop in their children. Or they pray for their children's marriages and relationships.

All too often it appears as if those good and righteous prayers go unanswered or ignored.

I wish I could say that if you prayed for a good thing and you did it long and hard enough God was sure to grant it. But I can't say that. It just isn't so. Too often prayers go unanswered.

Now some people will say that God in his wisdom is deliberately not answering the prayer. They say that you only think you are asking for something good, but God knows that it is not, and God would not send something that would hurt you no matter how badly you think you want it.

Or, some people say that they are sure God has a plan and it will all work out in the end. Stay faithful and live in trust for God is sure to act.

Perhaps those are answers, and in some cases they may actually be true, but I think they still come up short when it comes to what Jesus talks about prayer.

Take what we learn from Jacob's wrestling match with God and apply it to Jesus' parable about persistent prayer. We discover that when we are praying persistently about something it is as if we are in a wrestling match with God. Even the parable of the unjust judge has that sort of element and the judge and the widow struggle on and on.

God could have ended that wrestling match with Jacob at any time he wanted. But if God would have done that he would have destroyed Jacob. God could also have just given Jacob the courage he needed in the first place, or changed the way Jacob thought from corrupt to honest. But God didn't do that. I don't think God was teaching Jacob a lesson in the wrestling match as much as God was honoring and preserving who Jacob was as a human being. In other words God would not violate Jacob's right to be his own person.

When you pray and wrestle with God over an issue this is what is happening. You are constantly taking that issue, that problem to God. You are engaging the problem in and through your relationship of faith with God. Over and over again you

are defining and shaping the problem in terms of faith. Will you eventually wear God down until God says, "Oh, all right. Have it your way." Did God do that with Jacob? No.

In the wrestling match we actually see God's never failing grace - although a wrestling match may not be our first idea of grace. But that is grace at its deepest and most powerful form. It is God's unwillingness to destroy Jacob or overpower him - just like God won't destroy or overpower us - but God continuing to pursue and never let go.

If I could have prayers answered my way, and if I could have God's grace my way I'd use them to make a nice and easy life for myself. I'd pray for the things I thought I needed and God would give them to me. God's gracious protection would keep bad things from happening to me and to the people I love. And when bad thing happened persistence in prayer would make it all better.

But that is not God's way. God says, "I will never let go of you though you fight me tooth and nail. I won't fix problems for you. But I will make sure that *who you are* - your identity

- your value, your sense of being is always and forever safe in me."

Pray persistently, obsessively. God hears your prayers. God may not answer them to your satisfaction. God may not do the good things you ask him to do. But in your persistence you are constantly taking those things before God your creator and protector. And though life may sometimes feel like a wrestling match with God, God will not let go. And God will never let who you are become lost. And that is a far greater answer to prayer than any surface answer we may wish for. Amen