

‘PERSISTENT PRAYER’

GEN 32:22-31/ LUKE 18:1-8

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

Well first I would like to thank you for having me with you all. I have heard much about this congregation, and you have some very good people representing you at Vancouver School of Theology. I am glad to be here.

I was also glad to see the readings for this week and thought “Oh I like these ones!” When I preached with the set readings a few weeks ago at my home parish, I felt quite differently. But no matter how I feel, we are given an opportunity to see how God might be speaking into this time and how we are called to respond.

And so, we begin at the very beginning in Genesis. We find ourselves in the midst of a struggle and one that feels almost shocking. Is Jacob, a mere mortal, really allowed to wrestle with an angel? Well, we could argue that it isn’t really Jacob’s fault. Scripture tells us that a man wrestled with him until daybreak. What?! That already leaves us with so many questions. And it seems that the man is a bit grumpy about the fact that the wrestling match seemed to be going in Jacob’s favour. So, with a one-two punch he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. My first response was “that’s not very nice” but the angel’s response is quite different and surprising when he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” Who was the instigator? Who is in control? I would have thought it’s the angel but then Jacob, with his now injured hip, goes and says, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” What courage or audacity that would have taken to not only keep a hold of the messenger of God but also to demand a blessing before he goes.

Could we imagine that moment. In the midst of what can feel like a struggle with God - whether in our own lives or when our hearts hurt on behalf of those we love or for those that we are

called to seek justice. The struggle feels real, and it might even feel like we have received that same one two punch. We are exhausted, we are limping, we might feel a little broken, we are in despair. And yet, in the midst and despite of it all, we cry out for a blessing. We will live into the not always easy life that we are called to but, in the midst of it all, we need God's blessings. And despite all that is happening, we need to know that we are still blessed. Though I kinda want ask God why does it always have to be so hard?

And we might even ask that question when we turn to our Gospel reading. Jesus tells us this parable of a widow and a judge. We learn that the widow has been experiencing injustice from the hands of another. We don't know any details, but the situation is dire enough that she seeks out the help of the justice system. In her agony, she cries out "Grant me justice against my accuser." And she is going to keep showing up until she gets the help that she needs. This seeking of justice should not have to be so hard.

In this historical time, widows did not inherently have any rights. But the law of Moses called the people to care and to offer compassion for the widow. This call is so deep in the hearts of those that worship Yahweh that justice should have been granted right away. But we learn that the judge did not live by this mandate. Jesus begins, "in a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people." When the judge met the widow in his court room, he did not see one worthy of care or compassion. And it sounds like her identity as a widow is irrelevant as far as the judge is concerned. For this description of the judge shows one who had no conscience or scruples. His decisions were not made with any respect for any of those he served. And we also learned that he neither served nor had any fear or respect for the God of Israel.

And this is important because respect has nothing to do with his reasons for granting justice to the widow. It had everything to do with the fact that the widow kept showing up and demanding justice over and over again. But it still wasn't her perseverance that turned him to her favour. At least not directly, as we hear his internal monologue as he makes his decision. "Though I have no fear of God, no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her

justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” Her persistence was seen as a bother. And a bother that could have consequences. It seems a more literal translation of “so that she may not wear me out” is more like so that “she may give me a black eye.” This could both mean that he is literally afraid that she might punch him in the eye or figuratively afraid that she could damage his reputation.

In the end justice is granted but Jesus continues by saying “will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them.” We learn here that persistence doesn’t bother God. Persistence doesn’t make God want to stop having to deal with us and our needs. No, it seems this brings us closer to God and God closer to us.

But maybe that’s what prayer is for. Or more so, maybe that’s what is prayer is about. We always think of the image of prayer as sitting quietly with heads bowed, eyes closed, and hands clasped. But maybe prayer is more of a wrestling match.

In everyday life, I think the wrestling ring is the last place that we would ever find ourselves or ever willingly put ourselves. And yet, there is something that calls out and invites us into this place where an encounter with God is possible. It requires our whole body, heart, mind, and soul to be fully present and fully prepared to keep on wrestling until the bell of blessing rings. When we pray, we enter the wrestling ring – ready to throw ourselves down on God but also prepared to be thrown down by God.

This is might not have been the new image of prayer that you were expecting or even wanting. That may be because our image of wrestling looks more like what we see on TV than the image between Jacob and God’s messenger. And maybe its hard to imagine the persistent widow presenting herself in the courtroom, fully prepared to give that one two punch to the judge so that justice might be given.

But we must remember who it is that we are wrestling and persisting with. We are wrestling with the One who longs for and seeks justice even more than we do. We are wrestling with the One who has known a bruised and battered body and heart so that one day pain and tears and

even death would be no more. So, as we pray for justice, God can already see that day and promises that day will come.

And so we wrestle and we pray in persistence. We show up and we keep showing up. In prayer we enter the place where Christ longs to offer the blessings of the Kingdom but also for us to receive the truth that we are blessed. We wrestle because our healing is worth it. We show up because justice for God's whole creation is worth it. And we hold on tightly because not only is God worth it, but also worthy to receive our honour and our praise, our laughter and our tears, our hopes and our dreams, and our wrongdoings and our fears.

So yes, I do like these readings for today. But it doesn't necessarily make the living out of these readings any easier. Prayer is hard work and prayer is long work. And so my friends, I pray, that you will meet the One that longs to hear your every cry. I pray that You will receive the One who loves to hold your every care. And I pray that you will experience the blessing of the One who has long been praying on our behalf. Today and every day, may you be blessed.

Amen!