

Genesis 32:22-31 ~ Luke 18:1-8

Persistent Faith

October 20, 2019 ~ Healing Service

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Introduction to Gospel reading:

Is a dislocated hip the badge of persistent faith? Jacob's all-night wrestling match with a mysterious man/angel says, "yes." What about constant badgering by a widow? Is that what faith looks like? Today's scripture lessons treat us to two stories of serious struggle. In the lesson we are about to hear, Jesus tells a parable where he sets up a judge and a widow as opponents in a boxing ring. Then Luke sums up the parable with this question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith?" That question makes me wonder what human faith looks like to Jesus. Let's listen now to this story that gives us a glimpse of what the Son of Man is looking for.

Sermon:

When I was about 8 years old my oldest sister, Wendy, was a full-on teenager of 15, and she was already attracting a great deal of male attention. Being 8, I was old enough to answer the phone but too young to be aware of the finer points of phone etiquette. This, of course, was way back in the time of landlines, when (if you can imagine) an *entire* household, in our case 7 people, shared a single phone line, attached to the wall.

Being the youngest in the family, I was always trying to keep up with my older brother and sisters, on everything; and *especially* on the family's inside jokes. And so, I knew all about this guy named "Paul," who kept calling Wendy and trying to ask her out, even though she had no interest in dating him. He would call and she would turn him down. He would call again, and she would turn him down. Again, and again this kept happening. So on about his 8th or 9th try, my mom nicknamed him, "Persistence." From that moment on, that was the name he went by in our house.

Well, you can probably guess where this is going. One day he called and I answered the phone, as I had been taught: "Hello, this is Laurie." He responded, "Hi, this is Paul. Could I speak to Wendy?" And I, very politely as I had been taught, said to him, "Just a moment please." Then, (without covering the receiver), I proceeded to yell at the top of my lungs so Wendy, upstairs in her room with the door closed would be sure to hear me, "Wen-dy! The phone is for you! It's Per-sis-tence!" Well, after that, he never called again.

The scripture we just heard is Jesus' puzzling parable about the disproportionate power of persistent faith. Just to be clear: There are some important differences between Jesus' parable about the judge and the widow, and the family story I just told you. My story was an event that actually happened, but doesn't teach us about anything important. It's nothing more than a cautionary tale about the typical hazards of teen romance and smart-aleck little sisters. On the other hand, in this scripture, Jesus tells a short, punchy parable about the life-changing, world-redeeming power of persistent faith.

Jesus does this by creating two familiar characters who are acting completely out of type. He describes a judge whose whole job is to be just and to mete out justice, and yet this one is just the opposite. Jesus really wants us to get that point—not once but twice in this 4-verse parable, we are told that this judge, “had no fear of God nor had respect for people.” Nor does this dauntless widow act her culturally assigned part. In those days, a widow by definition was coded as penniless, powerless, faceless, forgotten. What is up with these two?

A little context will help us here. Jesus whips out this story in the midst of his long, final days that will lead him to the cross. Even at this late juncture in their journey together, his closest disciples, his A+ students, keep failing to get what God really cares about and what kinds of answers that God grants us. Like the question that led to this parable back in chapter 17 verse 20-21, where the Pharisees had asked Jesus *when* the kingdom of God was coming. To which he replied, “The kingdom of God is *not coming with things that can be observed*, ... For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” Jesus not only reframes the “when” question with a “where” answer. He takes a future hypothetical and turns it into a here and now, you and I who are talking together right now.

But still those first Christ followers went ahead and filled in the blank to the when question with their own answer and got it wrong. By the time this gospel was written down—at least 40 or 50 years *after* Jesus’ life on earth, the early Christian church, was getting discouraged by what seemed to them like a *major delay* in Jesus’ promised return. Where was he? What was taking so long? What had happened to their slam dunk Plan A? Things were not going as expected. The opening line in verse 1, that this is parable was about the need to pray always and not to lose heart, was Luke’s interpretation, Luke hearing an encouraging message in this parable, for his discouraged faith community.

Does this sound familiar? Yes, I believe the call “to pray always and not to lose heart” in the midst of gut wrenching, mind-boggling, life-changing circumstances is a persistent challenge. We all know about being pulled into Plan B, or C, or even chucking the idea that there is any plan at all. This call, to pray always and not to lose heart—took center stage for Jesus’ disciples as he was making his way to Jerusalem, and it became a central theme for Luke’s audience, as well. I believe it is also in the air we are breathing here this morning. How can we continue “to pray always and not to lose heart” with our nation swirling in the cross winds of the impeachment inquiry howl and swirl all around us? How can we continue “to pray always and not to lose heart” when we hear about the eroding situation in Syria, or the continuing plight of immigrant families at our own Southern border? How can we continue “to pray always and not to lose heart” after the shooting a week ago of Atatiana Jefferson in her own home, in Fort Worth, Texas by a police officer?

And right here in our own Marshfield community: How can we continue to pray always and not to lose heart when the number of children who are food insecure and depend on the Nutrition Over Weekends (NOW) lunches has risen from 113 children when it began in 2013, to 428 children last year. Just one more: how can we continue to pray always and not to lose heart

when the number of youths experiencing homelessness right here in Marshfield has risen from 30 to 93 in the past eight years?

A closer look at Jesus' parable provides us a vivid image of what "persistent faith" looks like in the face of discouraging, if not impossible odds. He draws a political cartoon of a common situation in ancient Israel. Judges and widows actually saw a lot of each other. Judges were supposed to be fair, impartial, agents of "Shalom." There were no juries, so they had all the power. Widows at the time were completely vulnerable because they could not inherit their husband's estate, which went to the deceased husband's sons or brothers. So Jesus takes this familiar scene and messes with it.

He gives us a heartless, unjust all-powerful judge and puts him in the ring with an otherwise powerless, vulnerable widow. Her shocking strength comes from her tenacity. Our English translation "wear me out" hides the literal Greek which means "give me a black eye" or "punch me out." It is clearly a boxing metaphor in the Greek. What chance on regular earth, in real time did the widow have of getting justice? None. To this day, those who are poor, uneducated, or "different" in any way from the majority culture are least likely to get justice in our court system. And yet, here in Jesus' story, this widow wields surprising power and wins. Her persistent faith wields a potential knock-out blow that made the begrudging judge do the right thing. That's what "persistent faith" looks like, in cartoon.

Luke drives home Jesus' point by saying, if this bad judge finally does the right thing for the wrong reason, *how much more* will God, who is love; God, who is just; make a way for you and for all of us? The point: especially when you're on the ledge of despair and ready to give up; when you've been wrestling with who knows what for not only one night but every night for so long that every socket feels out of joint, or even when you've stopped feeling anything at all, that's the very moment when Jesus says stay in the ring and keep praying. Don't give in or give over to the bad, the wrong, the injustice. Ever.

As long as you are praying, you have not given up. As long as you are praying: even when and especially when your prayer is a shout, or a swear, or a flood of angry tears, Jesus is with you. Everyone can pray. Don't get hung up on the feeling that you don't know how to pray, because you feel uncomfortable praying out loud in front of other people. Prayer is simply being honest and open with God. I'm not saying this is easy. Being honest and open is hard work. Sometimes it feels like a wrestling match. But it's crucial to a persistent faith that will change you and in turn can change the world.

Going back to "Paul"—not the Apostle Paul, but my sister Wendy's wanna-be boyfriend Paul AKA "Persistence": He would have saved himself some heartache if he had given up one phone call sooner. But we have no reason to give up on God, because God never gives up on us. Instead, God became one of us, Through Christ and his work on the cross, we can go the distance and already know who wins. We are Easter people. Thanks to Jesus. Persistent faith is all that Jesus is looking for. Amen.