

RCL YEAR C, Proper 24, October 21st, 2007
Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5; St. Luke 18:1-8
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

When Billy Sunday was preaching all across America in the nineteen-forties he always did advance work in the cities he planned to visit. The time came for him to preach in Columbus, Ohio, so he wrote the mayor of Columbus and asked the mayor to provide him with the names of those citizens who might especially benefit from an upcoming revival. The mayor, knowing his constituency, sent Billy Sunday the local telephone book!

We imagine that the Bible is full of saintly folk, but if we'll take off our rose-colored glasses as we read, we'll quickly come to a different conclusion. The stories of the Bible, collected from across a wide swath of human history and experience, leave no doubt that people are deeply flawed. One gift the Bible gives us is to show God's relentless love for us in the face of our shortcomings, and the summons we are given to know the God who loves us so relentlessly.

Jacob is one such flawed character. As we learned last week in our afternoon Kerygma class, his name means "usurper," and that he did with self-serving frequency. As a young man he twice defrauded his brother Esau, deceived his own father, and dealt dishonestly with his father-in-law Laban, who, it must be said, first dealt poorly with Jacob. Now Jacob wants to come home, and in a very tangible way, Jacob's past has caught up with him. Brother Esau has learned of Jacob's return and is coming to meet him, and when Jacob hears there are four hundred men with Esau, he has reason to believe it may not be a welcoming party. Esau, he fears, has come to kill him and assume his ill-gotten gain. So Jacob divides his household into two portions in hopes that, should his brother attack, he won't lose all. He sends his wives and concubines and children on ahead, and we might wish he sent them ahead with the team he thought most likely to escape his brother's wrath, though given Jacob's character, we cannot be sure. Meanwhile, Jacob makes camp on the banks of the River Jabbok and spends an awfully restless night.

We are shown a scene rivaling anything Big Time Wrestling might have to offer, a wrestling match that lasts until daybreak. Though the adversary is not costumed, his identity is obscure. He is no light-weight. Jacob wrestles the man to a seeming draw, but the man strikes Jacob on the hip-socket, and Jacob suddenly understands he is wrestling with something more than flesh and blood, and, never one to miss an opportunity for self-promotion, he demands from his adversary a blessing.

I like this image of God as our adversary. We are treated in twenty-first century America to sweet and friendly images of God. God is the one we sing snappy songs to on Christian radio, and Jesus is our invisible best-friend, half buddy and half mascot. God is the wind at the back of the Republican Party, the mega-church and apple pie. But here God is mysterious, dangerous, and dead-set against much that we are about.

Like Jacob, our futures are open as individuals, as a parish and a nation. We arrive at the Jabbok, and it just might be that if we are to cross over, if we are to receive a blessing and a new name, as Jacob did, we must contend with God. All is not sweetness

and light with the Lord; church is not here for our diversion. We must wrestle if we are to make advance.

The Episcopal Church, all the way back to the English Reformation, has a proud, some may say unsettling history of wrestling with difficult issues. Our reformation of Catholic Faith in the sixteenth century launched us on this course, and our branch of Christianity has generally held that it is not enough merely to assert religious truths, but that they have to be tried and re-tried, that Reason is part and parcel of the path of Faith. We determined a couple of hundred years back that the insights born of the eighteenth century Enlightenment were on the whole a good thing, that advances in medicine and the sciences was to be encouraged, and that the Bible should be read using the best tools on offer from archaeology, textual and critical studies. None of these determinations came without struggle, and we continue to contend with one another over how to relate our Faith and the biblical revelation to the ethical and social questions of the present day.

In this Season of Stewardship, the story of Jacob reminds us that one of the most important things we have stewardship of is not our money, but of this spiritual legacy which insists on holding Faith and Reason together.

Nearly all questions of interest are questions about authority and its exercise, and in matters of religious authority Episcopalians contend for a particular approach to our sacred writings, which St. Paul tells us today are both inspired and useful. There are two prevalent mistakes in our larger culture regarding Scripture. The first is to dismiss the writings as irrelevant to contemporary life, an assumption made by secularists and those un-persuaded by the Christian vision. The second mistake is to imagine that the Bible contains inerrant texts which do not require interpretation, that the Bible may somehow serve as an authority apart from full engagement with other intellectual disciplines, a notion believed by a fair swath of American Christianity. This parish contends for mediating ground between those polls, advocating for the relevance and shaping power of Scripture, and for the necessity of a rigorous engagement between our religious texts and every other form of knowledge. All insight, all truth, all genuine learning come from God and work together to show us how to ford the Jabbok, and none of it comes easily. Nothing worthwhile ever does.

What are you wrestling with at this juncture in your life? How can your Faith serve the struggle? In what ways is God challenging you, that God might more completely bless you and lead you to a new place?

Whatever our struggle, St. Paul reminds us that the inspired texts of Scripture can be profoundly useful to us as we see ourselves in the texts, as we encounter the mediated presence of God in the text, as we are reminded of God's constancy and the truths of our Faith.

Jesus, in today's story of the persevering widow, tells us we ought to pray in times of difficulty and not lose heart. We often give up on prayer. Jesus tells us it's worth the effort, worth the struggle; that prayer will be to good effect, and to keep at it. Part of the struggle of prayer is learning what to pray for.

This widow is at the bottom of the social barrel in first-century Palestine, with no wealth or power or male patronage; vulnerable and with no recourse for her grievance. She finally prevails, not because the judge has had a change of heart, but because she has made herself annoying. The Greek word translated here as "wearing the judge out,"

literally means “to give someone a black eye.” Her importunity blackens the judge’s reputation, and so he relents, in self-preservation.

One interesting possibility in reading this text is to guess that it is about more than badgering a reluctant God to grant a list of wants and desires. Rather, the widow models a way of life oriented toward seeking for justice in an unjust world.

One dimension of true prayer is not to lose heart in the pursuit of justice, even in the face of people and systems that care not one whit whether justice is or is not done. Prayer is to join with God in relentlessly seeking for justice in a world where injustice is rife. This, too, opens for us new ways of reflecting on the nature of our Stewardship this Stewardship season.

Struggles at the Jabbok, struggles in prayer, with political and moral issues, always occur when matters of importance are in flux, authority and guidance unclear, and the future still malleable. The greatest struggles are those to shape minds and win hearts, and because houses of worship are always also places where perspectives are shaped and identities forged, we will always be about the contest. It is only retrospectively that we can ever say we were glad for the testing fires and the changed perspectives, because it is such hard work at the time. Yet central to a commitment to Christ, is, I believe, a willingness to hear the challenge, to rise to the challenge, to struggle and contend. Amen.
GFW+