

19 Pentecost, Proper 24, Yr. C

October 20, 2019

Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8

These scriptures put me in mind of a song from Sesame Street – the one Kermit the frog sings: It's not easy being green. In the same way, it's not easy being human, trying from our situation of being finite, with limited understanding, trying to contemplate and understand the ways of God. It's a struggle and the thing that this morning's scriptures have in common is struggle, wrestling. In the Genesis reading, Jacob wrestles with his relationship with his brother and with his own past behavior, with his guilt and fear. In the letter to Timothy, the author acknowledges the human need to wrestle with scripture, to allow it to teach and challenge, all the while fighting against our own "itching ears." And in Luke, there's also wrestling; wrestling over justice and power and, on a deeper level, wrestling with the need for persistence in prayer.

Let's start with Jacob. You'll remember the story of Isaac and Rebekah who have twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau was born first and text tells us that he was red and hairy. Jacob was the second to be born and he was born hanging on to Esau's heel. He was named Jacob, meaning the one who supplants, the one who takes the place of another. Big hint here as to how their relationship would go! The first part of the Bible has many stories of dysfunctional families and this is one of them. The trouble here was that Isaac loved Esau best and Rebekah loved Jacob. Parental favoritism and sibling rivalry from the beginning. Esau was brave and strong and Jacob was neither; but he made up for it by his cunning. One of the first interactions between them is when Esau returns from a day in the countryside, tired and hungry. Jacob has stayed at home and has made a stew. When Esau asks for some, Jacob bargains with him and offers an extremely disproportionate exchange. Fine, I'll give you some stew if you give me your birthright. The birthright was partly material, a matter of inheritance, but it was also partly spiritual privilege – the one who had the birthright would be the one to shape the family's relationship with God, its ideas and ideals. One wonders just how hungry Esau was to bargain that away.

The next interaction we're told about is one you probably remember. When Isaac is blind and dying, it's time for him to give his blessing to his elder son. So he calls Esau and asks him to hunt and prepare some game for him to eat and then he will give Esau that special blessing. It's thought that this blessing was a thing of great power – conveying something of the energy and vitality of Isaac's soul to the one he blesses; it's so powerful that once it's given it can't be taken back. But Rebekah wants Jacob to have the blessing, so she concocts a scheme whereby Jacob covers his neck and arms with goat skins and goes into Isaac's presence, pretending to be Esau. It's a powerful story, because Isaac seems to have his suspicions – WHICH OF MY SONS ARE YOU, he asks. And, when he's given the meal Rebekah has prepared, he asks again, HOW DID YOU GET THIS SO QUICKLY? And then, it's COME HERE SO I CAN FEEL YOU AND BE SURE. I guess you must be Esau – you feel like him, even though you sound like Jacob. And he gives the coveted blessing. But when Esau returns and finds out what has happened, you can hear the family breaking apart. You feel it in his heartbroken cry; FATHER, BLESS ME TOO! HAVE YOU NOT KEPT A BLESSING FOR ME? And you get it again when Esau threatens to kill Jacob and in Rebekah's haste to get Jacob out of town. And what's left? Jacob is seen as contemptible; Isaac is bitter, Esau is cheated and angry, Jacob is gone and won't return until after both Isaac and Rebekah have died. The family is torn apart.

Jacob has further struggles but as we come in today, he's coming back home after a 14 year absence, now with two wives and many possessions. And he's worried about his reception – rightly so. I doubt that he thinks Esau will have forgiven him, perhaps because he knows how guilty he is and perhaps because he wouldn't have forgiven Esau if their situations were reversed. He's guilty and he knows it. So when he gets a report that Esau is coming with 400 men, he undoubtedly imagines that each of them has a sword in hand. His own guilt gives rise to fear. So he sends presents to Esau – not all at once, but one after the other, hoping to impress, to overwhelm, to appease. And then he divides his camp so that if one group is slaughtered, the other might escape. And then he, alone, crosses over the river to spend the night. Think about it: he knows what

he's done, he doesn't expect forgiveness and he's thoroughly afraid. He's gone from being a person of consequence, back into an arena where people see him, and rightly, as a liar and a cheat. So he's already wrestling psychologically.

And then the stranger appears in the night. Perhaps this is a metaphor for the struggle that we undergo when we're evading the truth about ourselves. On the outside, Jacob is successful, he's won it all; but on the inside, he's shadowed by doubt and guilt and fear. It's the kind of stuff you can ignore during the daytime, when you're busy, but when you're alone at night, there it is. Some commentators point out that it was necessary for Jacob to face the truth about himself in order to become the person fit for what God had in mind. The wrestling goes on through the night and Jacob perseveres, insisting that he be blessed. Here is this flawed man, aware of the divine meaning of life who, in spite of all his sinfulness, wants, more than anything, truth and forgiveness and blessing. And he gets it. But there's a cost – he's a different fellow, physically signified by his limp. But he's also different in a deeper way – now he's capable of seeking and receiving Esau's forgiveness. He's capable of moving himself out of the center so that he can see the face of God. He sees it at the river but he also sees it the next day when Esau, rather than attacking him, welcomes him with kindness and Jacob says, I HAVE COME INTO YOUR PRESENCE AS INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

So wrestling and struggle, but also perseverance. The reading from Timothy recognizes that there will be struggle, and advises perseverance. That passage also invites us, as readers, to wrestle with scripture. About four verses in there's that sentence: ALL SCRIPTURE IS INSPIRED BY God and is useful for teaching...so that everyone who belongs to God may be equipped for every good work. The first part of that sentence has been said to be the most dangerous verse in the Bible because, lifted out of context, it's been used to justify literalism and inerrancy, the view that no error can appear in the Bible. But it turns out that that sentence can also be translated differently. Instead of ALL SCRIPTURE IS INSPIRED BY GOD as useful, it can be EVERY SCRIPTURE THAT IS INSPIRED BY GOD IS USEFUL. You see the difference. The latter translation requires

us to wrestle with the meaning of scripture, to discern what is inspired by God and what is humanly and culturally bound. This reading means that we take the Bible seriously but not literally. That we open ourselves to its truths and to its challenges. Remember MLK saying that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice? Well, here we can say that the arc of the Biblical text is long, but it always bends towards compassion, love and justice. And it needs to be read that way.

Justice is part of the parable we heard from Luke. We don't know what was going on; we don't know the woman's complaint. What we do know is that there was wrestling and struggle to get justice. And we know that the woman persevered. So, while this parable can be read as a teaching on justice, that it will be achieved in the end, it can also be read as an exhortation to persevere in prayer. But a caution here. We all know people who have prayed with great persistence for something that didn't occur. But I think we need to think more deeply about prayer. Most of the time, we pray for things we need or want – nothing wrong with that. But the kind of prayer that I think Jesus is talking about here, is the prayer encapsulated in the Lord's Prayer: thy kingdom come, thy will be done. It's prayer that asks for insight into God's will, that asks that, like Jacob, we will be the ones who are changed, who will see more clearly, who can come to know God and God's will and then to line ourselves up with that will so that we are cooperating with it. It's a prayer, then, for grace and insight and courage. It's the prayer of Jesus – not my will, but yours, God. It's a big prayer, one that will challenge us, one with which we will often struggle, one that will take all our hearts and minds and souls. But it's also one that allows us to come to that for which we were created. Amen.