



Wrestling with God

Seventh in the Fall sermon series "Taking Jesus Seriously"

Genesis 32:22-31

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, October 20th, 2019

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Text: Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. (v. 24)

While waiting at a red light at the corner of War Memorial Drive and Knoxville, the car in front of me had a license plate that read "Psalm 10." As I waited for the light to change I did that which you are not supposed to do; I picked up my cell phone and did a quick Google search for the 10th Psalm. What I found surprised me. It begins with these words,

Why, Lord, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In their arrogance the wicked hunt down the weak, ...

I wondered why the driver ahead of me chose that Psalm. Did he have a crisis of faith? Did something happen to him that shook his faith? Was he wrestling with God?

I believe that there are times when each one of us wrestles with God. We think that we have everything all figured out and then something happens that makes us question what we believed; it may even shake our faith to its very core. Often times we are caught off guard.

All of this brings us to our Old Testament lesson; the night that Jacob wrestled with a Stranger all through the night.

From birth Jacob was someone you had to be careful of. His very name, Jacob, literally means "heel-grabber" or "supplanter." When he and his twin brother Esau were born Jacob's hand was holding on to Esau's heel pulling him back.

During their youth Jacob bartered Esau for his birthright. In a time when primogeniture was the custom Jacob, the younger son, received Esau's double portion of his father's estate.

Later, Jacob conspired with his mother Rebekah to deceive his blind father and receive Esau's blessing! Thus, by hook and crook he completely supplanted his older brother.

At learning of this latter trickery by his younger brother Esau swore blood revenge. Jacob had to run for his life. With his mother Rebekah's assistance Jacob fled to his uncle Laban, Rebekah's brother who lived in a foreign land.

While Jacob prospered in this new land there came a time when Jacob had to face his past. He had to go home. Worried about how his brother Esau would receive him, Jacob divided his household into two groups and sent what may be interpreted as a generous bribe to Esau before spending a restless night by himself on the banks of the Jabbok River. It was there that he wrestled with a Stranger until daybreak.

As the sun began to peek above the horizon the Stranger commanded Jacob to release him. "Not until you give me a blessing" Jacob replied. As if he didn't already know, the Stranger asked, "What is your name?" "Jacob". "You will no longer be called Jacob. You will be called 'Israel' because you struggled with God and human beings and prevailed."

Jacob asked the Stranger for his name but the Stranger would not give it. "Why do you want to know?" the Stranger asked. Jacob then realized who the Stranger was, God. In the shadows of the night he had seen God face to face and lived!" Jacob called the place of the divine encounter "Peniel," which means "the face of God".

Jacob left his encounter with God not only with a new name but with a limp. He was forever changed. When you wrestle with God, you leave the encounter forever changed.

I believe that our Gospel lesson is also about wrestling with God.

In it Jesus told his disciples a parable about a widow who day after day persistently appealed to a despicable judge, a man who cared neither for God nor his fellow human, for justice. The judge, though, was selfish and self-centered. and He was undeserving of his position. Despite this, the widow persisted. She did not lose faith.

The parable is not about wearing God down. It is about wrestling with our faith when our prayers seem to go unanswered. It is about having faith that, even if we do not see it, prayers for justice will be answered. It is about having such faith in the ultimate goodness of God that we commit ourselves to working for justice.

There are 28 verses on "justice" in the Old Testament. They include giving justice to the weak and the orphaned, advocating for the rights of the afflicted and destitute (Psalm 82:3), pleading the widow's cause (Isaiah 1:17), not profiting off of the misfortune of others (Amos 8:5), not showing partiality toward the rich over the poor in the court of law (Amos 8:5), to give only a few examples.

Christine Erickson¹, the director of Children at Risk in “Oneless Ministry”, noted in Shared Hope International’s periodical that biblical justice “starts by seeing people as God sees them--recognizing that we are all created in the image of God.”

It is important for those who wish to take Jesus seriously to “pursue”, in Erickson’s words, “physical and spiritual freedom for the oppressed so that they can become who God created them to be.”

Taking Jesus seriously means that we commit ourselves to the pursuit of justice on behalf of the least, the last, the lost, and the forgotten. It means that we work to protect the vulnerable, advocate for the oppressed, walk alongside the wounded, and point those around us to the One who heals, restores, and redeems.

The pursuit of justice starts with a foundation of prayer because we know, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, that in this world we are not merely battling flesh and blood but spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. But it doesn’t end with prayer. Prayer leads to action.

Taking Jesus seriously means that we step out of our comfort zones. It means that we must use the gray matter that the good Lord placed between our ears and not jump in with haphazard quick fixes.

In a long night of the soul, Jacob wrestled with God, discovered who God created him to be and was forever changed. This changed Jacob, now called Israel--”one who wrestles with God and prevails” had the courage to meet his estranged brother Esau with courage and humility.

The widow prayed persistently for the cause of justice. Jesus held up as an example for his disciples, for those fully committed to following him, her persistent faith in the face of an earthly judge who had concern for neither God nor humanity. Would those who take Jesus seriously have such faith?

“When the Son of man comes,” Jesus asked, “will he find such faith?” It is a question for us to consider.

To God be the glory. Amen.

1. <https://sharedhope.org/2018/06/04/biblical-justice-and-social-justice/>