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C: 19th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 29/ Proper 24
Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 18:1-8

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Salem, Bridgeport

“How Prayer Works”

In our Bible study this week we were reading from the book of Acts, chapter 18,
and after we read a few verses I asked, “What jumped out at you?”

And one of the participants said, “What jumped out at me was the verse, ‘And Paul stayed in Corinth one and a half years’
because it suddenly struck me that what took less than a second for us to read
wasn’t just a second in Paul’s life. In Paul’s life it was a year and a half.

I think sometimes we forget how long things take and we expect immediate results.”

I thought that was a very profound observation, & indeed I believe that’s part of the problem for us when we read the Bible –
because it’s like reading the Cliff Notes version of a great novel.

You get the facts, but you are not drawn into the drama, into the emotional context, into the power of the story.
I guess that’s why I prefer reading historical novels to history books – because reading history doesn’t affect my heart;
it doesn’t draw me into the emotional encounters or into the reality of people’s experience.

And from what psychology has taught us, human beings do not act out of their thinking brains –
no matter how much we might like to think that’s the case – but rather we humans act out of our feelings.

And so if you want to affect someone’s actions you must touch their heart.

So today we heard the story of the widow who sought justice from the unjust judge.

It took only a few minutes to read & we heard it with our ears & we interpreted it with our minds & we understood the lesson.
But has it moved us emotionally? Will it move us to action? Maybe. Or maybe not.

I suppose that’s why we have sermons – so that we can delve a little deeper into the stories
to find that emotional context, that spiritual truth, that has the power to transform our lives.

So let’s think about that widow for a bit.

Remember that in Jesus’ day women were property, both under Jewish law and under Roman law.

Women belonged first to their fathers, and then to their husbands.

If they were looking for justice, it would be their fathers and their husbands who would seek it on their behalf.

Widows back then had no standing.

Yes, people knew that there were widows, but most people didn’t give them much thought.

They were the equivalent of homeless people on our streets today.

Other than perhaps giving them a token coin when we pass by, how much time and money and energy do most of us spend
on improving their life circumstances?

The widow in our story had been treated unfairly and she desired justice.

Most widows probably would not even have attempted to seek justice, but something in this woman drove her to do so.

And so she decided to pursue justice through the courts.

But the court system back then was pretty much the same as it is today,
in that individuals experience it differently based on their place in society.

Both back then and today, courts were much more concerned with those who had power and privilege and wealth
than with the marginalized and disenfranchised and oppressed.

If any widow dared to go to court she would likely not receive the same kind of attention that a wealthy man might receive.

And yet this woman goes and daringly enters into a system not designed to welcome her,
and then it gets even worse as she ends up,

not with a compassionate and socially minded judge
who is concerned with justice for the poor and oppressed,
but with someone who is known to be an unjust judge.

She pleads her case and he dismisses her.

Just imagine what that must have felt like!

She's considered to be of no value in society, she has been wronged already, and even though the odds are against her, she screws up her courage and enters into a system she knows is not on her side, finds herself in front of a particularly unsympathetic judge, and pleads her case.

She waits for justice and justice is denied. She and her case are dismissed.

It was the emotional equivalent of being punched to the ground.

Now that would have been enough to make most people say, "Well, I tried and it didn't work" and leave it at that.

But instead she picks herself up off the ground emotionally and tries again.

And again she is slammed to the ground emotionally. And she gets up again and is denied again.

And so with emotional bruises on top of bruises on top of bruises she continues to go and finally – finally – the judge gives up.

She has been so persistent that she has worn him down.

It's not that he suddenly sees that she has a case, it's not that he's impressed with her perseverance, it's simply that he's tired – exhausted – and he just wants her to go away.

And that's why he gives her justice.

We have a similar story in our first lesson with Jacob wrestling God.

Jacob is in a situation where he's scared to death that he's going to die but he believes that God has promised something to him.

God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many generations and that he and his descendants would be blessed to be a blessing.

That blessing was passed on to Isaac.

And it was supposed to be passed down to Esau,

but Jacob had tricked Esau out of both his birthright and his father's blessing.

And despite how he went about getting them, Jacob knows that the birthright and the blessing now belong to him.

At the same time it looks as if they are about to slip out of his grasp.

So he reminds God of that blessing and God appears in the form of a man who wrestles with him all night.

Again we have a story that just takes a few minutes to read, but we're not living it.

Can you imagine wrestling with God, the creator of the entire universe, all night?

Can you even imagine wrestling a human being all night?

I tried all-night bowling one time and by 6 o'clock in the morning I could barely stand up.

I was so tired that when I went to roll the ball, it slipped out of my hand and rolled backwards!

Or maybe you've watched an all-night dance contest that goes on for a day or more and by the end the people can barely stand up.

It's hard to do anything all night, but imagine wrestling all night long!

Yet there is something in Jacob that will not give up.

And he says, "I am going to hold on and hold on and hold on until you assure me of this blessing, God!"

And amazingly Jacob gets the blessing.

The Bible teaches us that each one of us has been called according to God's purpose.

God has a vision and a promise and a blessing in store for each one of us children of God.

But these visions and promises and blessings often take both time and faith.

As I wrote in our newsletter earlier this month,

faith is not believing that God exists or believing that God did certain things in the past.

Faith means trust, and it is born and grown and lived out in relationship with the living God.

Faith is engagement with God on a daily basis.

Sometimes that engagement may feel like God embracing us.

Sometimes it may feel like God walking in front of us and leading us.

Sometimes it may feel like God carrying us.

And sometimes that engagement comes in the form of wrestling.

So today we have these two stories,
and both of them are intended to illustrate how you and I are to live our lives.

Specifically there are at least 3 basic principles involved.

The first of these is that what we seek must be in align with what God has specifically promised or at least generally desires.
In the widow's case she sought justice, and God is always on the side of justice.

So what the widow desires is in alignment with what God desires.

In Jacob's case, he sought the fulfillment of God's promise,
and so again, what Jacob desires is in alignment with what God desires.

What that means for us is that if we are praying for something that God does not desire
and for something that God has not promised, then no amount of faith in the world is going to get us what we want.

How do we know what God desires?

Well that knowledge comes within the context of an intimate relationship with God
that is grounded in prayer and in Bible study.

Through prayer or scripture, you may hear God's voice, or you may get some unmistakable sign.
If you don't get what you want, the first thing to consider is that maybe what you want is not what God wants,
and perhaps you need to open your mind to other possibilities.

So the first thing that's important when we are seeking something from God
is that what we are seeking must be aligned with God's will.

The second principle is that what we are seeking will not always come immediately.

In fact, unless it's simply a sign we are looking for along the way, most things take time.

Again the stories in the Bible take only a few minutes to read,
but the playing out of those stories often took years or decades.

In real life most of the things that we seek take time.

I know that there are things that God has promised me that I've been waiting for for years and they're still not here,
yet I know they're coming.

Whether it's recovery from an illness, whether it's the healing of a broken relationship,
whether it's achieving some professional or financial goal, most things take time.

They take time for a number of reasons.

Sometimes it's because it's not only about us.

You and I are each but a tiny piece in a gigantic jigsaw puzzle.

We only see our little part, but God sees the whole picture
and God needs to get all of the other pieces in line in order for our piece to find its rightful place.

Sometimes it's because we're not ready to receive what we've asked for.

Sometimes God has to prepare us.

A young man I know was talking about being 30 and not being married
and he was lamenting the fact that he hasn't found the right person.

If he were to marry someone now it could be that the marriage might not be as strong
as if he marries someone in the future when God has had a chance to prepare him to be a better partner.

Or sometimes God may have to prepare somebody else, and in this young man's case
maybe it's that God is still working on preparing the right partner for him.

Sometimes answers to prayer take time because that's the only way we get to exercise our faith.

If everything came immediately and automatically, we wouldn't need faith.

And God wants us to have faith because this entire life that we lead
is about learning to trust in the God who made us and loves us.

And sometimes answers to prayer take time so that we become aware
that what we have sought has not come through our own efforts but only through God's grace.

So first what we seek must be in accordance with God's will for us,
and second, it most often takes some time for our requests to be granted.
Third, while we are waiting to get what we and God desire or what God has promised us,
we must hold on to faith, no matter what we see happening around us,
no matter how impossible it seems, and no matter how hard the struggle.
As soon as we begin to doubt, as soon as we give in to fear, as soon as we give up the struggle, we will lose.
If the widow hadn't kept going back to the judge she would never have gotten justice
and if Jacob hadn't kept wrestling he would have lost the match and his blessing.
As soon as we think or say, "There's no way such and such can happen",
then we have stopped living in faith, and in essence we have said, "God cannot do this",
and that, my friends, is blasphemy, and the giving in to doubt and fear, which is the exact opposite of faith.

So first what we seek must be in accordance with God's will for us,
second, it most often takes some time for our requests to be granted,
and third we must hold on to faith that no matter how impossible things look and no matter how long it takes,
God, who is faithful and just, will fulfill every promise.

And finally, when God has answered our prayers, it is crucial that we give God the glory.
We can't take credit, but must give God the honor due his name.
We must tell others what God has done for us in order to encourage others to persevere in faith also.

I know what God has promised me and although it's not here yet, I hold on in faith,
trusting that God is at work inside me, transforming my mind and my heart,
that God is at work in the circumstances of my life,
and that God is at work in other people's lives and circumstances that are or will somehow be intertwined with mine.

And I also believe in my soul that God has promises to fulfill here at Salem.
God has not brought us this far to leave us or to have us give up.
God created Salem, and while other congregations in Bridgeport have closed or moved,
God has kept us here, and blessed us with the financial resources to do great things.
It only took 12 disciples and Paul and the Holy Spirit to change the world!
It only took 1 congregation of 12 older members and the Holy Spirit
to build relationships with enough other churches to bring in the Luis Palau Association
and so galvanize 175 congregations to work together to witness and to serve in a way that is changing Bridgeport!
It only took 1 congregation of 20 people and the Holy Spirit to start a 24/7 self-service food pantry to serve 700 people/week
and so make a significant impact in one of the neediest areas of Bridgeport!

We say we believe in a God who delights in doing daring deeds.
We say we believe in a God who has boundless power and can do impossible things.
We say we believe in a God who loves us and hears us and answers us.

Well if we believe what we say, then we need to get our wills aligned with God's.
Like both Jacob and the widow we must keep declaring what God had promised.
Like Jacob we need to keep on wrestling, struggling until we get the blessing.
Like the widow we need to keep on keeping on until we defeat the enemy and receive what God desires for us.

Seek God's will.
And then hold onto God's specific promise to you
no matter how the struggle strains and drains you and no matter how many no's you hear.
Hold on in faith, not just hoping, but believing – knowing – that in the end you will receive everything that God has promised.

Faith is not for the faint of heart.
But we do not fight in our strength, but in the strength of the Lord.
All we need do is to trust and obey and God will make a way to get us to exactly where God has promised! Amen