

Sermon for Pentecost 19-C October 19, 2025

Genesis 32:22-31

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This morning we meet two people who refuse to let go. A widow who refuses to stop knocking at the judge's door. And a patriarch who refuses to stop wrestling. They live centuries apart—Jacob beside the Jabbok River and the widow in some village—but they share the same heartbeat of faith: *A refusal to give up on God even when God seems silent.* I love that!

Jesus tells the story of a widow and a judge. She is powerless; he is corrupt. She cries for justice; he ignores her. Finally, the judge says to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice." And the gospel writer tells us that Jesus told this parable "so that we will pray always and not lose heart."

That's an easy line to quote and a hard one to live. Because if we're honest, there are times when prayer feels exactly like the widow's experience—crying out to an empty courtroom. We knock on heaven's door until our knuckles bleed, and it feels like no one answers.

The parable dares to name that feeling. It doesn't hide behind clichés. The widow's persistence mirrors the experience of us who live in the long waiting between promise and fulfillment, between “thy kingdom come” and the world as it is.

This folks is our reality, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God has come among, Jesus' presence is within us, and is for us. Through his death and resurrection he has set us right before God. And at the same time, we struggle with the realities of this realm. Sin remains an ever real force in our lives. We live among wounded people who simply pass their woundedness on to others. And we do the same. We live in a realm where unfairness and injustice seem to freely reign. But here we are...just simply seeking to be faithful to the One who always is faithful to us.

And then Jesus turns the story on its head: “If even this unjust judge can be moved to act, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry to him day and night?” How much more?

That's the pivot. God is not the unjust judge. But sometimes it feels like it. And Jesus knows that. Which is why he tells this story—not to shame our doubts but to sustain our hope.

Faith is not fragile optimism. It is holy stubbornness. The kind that keeps praying when nothing changes. The kind that refuses to let silence be the last word.

Now, if you want an image of holy stubbornness, Jacob is your man. On the banks of the Jabbok River, Jacob finds himself alone. He's sent his family ahead. The night is thick with dread. Behind him is Laban, whom he's deceived; ahead of him is Esau, the brother he betrayed. The past and the future are closing in.

And out of the darkness, a stranger attacks. No introduction, no explanation—just a fight that lasts all night long.

This is no friendly sparring match. It's wrestling in the dust and not giving up. The text says, “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint.”

Still Jacob refuses to let go. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” That is the heartbeat of faith—the same heartbeat that beats in the widow’s chest centuries later. *When life wounds you and God feels distant, faith says, “I’m not letting go until something good comes out of this struggle.”*

Jacob’s opponent finally speaks: “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he says—trickster, deceiver, the one who grabs and schemes. But the man replies, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.”

He walks away limping, but blessed. Wounded, but renamed.

The widow and Jacob are companions across the centuries. One wrestles in the dark with God. The other pleads in the daylight with a judge. But both stories tell the truth about prayer: *It is not polite conversation with a distant deity—it is a struggle for blessing, a cry for justice, a refusal to release God until grace appears.*

Jacob’s night and the widow’s days are mirrors of our own long nights of waiting: the parent who keeps praying for a child who has wandered; the patient who keeps asking for healing that hasn’t come; the wounds in relationships that seem to not go away.

In those moments, prayer isn’t about eloquence—it’s about endurance. *Faith doesn’t always look like confidence. Sometimes it looks like persistence through tears.*

And yet, in both stories, something happens through the struggle itself. Jacob’s wrestling becomes the place of revelation—he names the place Peniel, saying, “I have seen God face to face.”

The widow’s persistence becomes the place where faith is found—Jesus ends his parable asking, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” *Faith, it turns out, is not proven by answers but by endurance.*

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge is not a guarantee that every prayer will be answered quickly. It’s a promise that God’s justice and compassion are more certain than delay itself. Jesus doesn’t say, “Pray, and you’ll get what you want.” He says, “Pray, and don’t lose heart.” *Because persistence isn’t about forcing God’s hand—it’s about shaping our hearts until they beat in rhythm with God’s heart.*

Amen