

## PENTECOST PROPER 24 C 2010

In this morning's Gospel parable, we encounter a righteous widow who forces a lawless judge to do the right thing through sheer tenacity. Day after day she appears before him demanding that he give her her due. Eventually she wears him down, and he grants her justice simply so that he can have some peace.

There is much to commend this story. My fear, however, is that the wrong people will take it to heart. The problem is that the stubborn often win out, whether they deserve to or not. It is therefore important to recognize that Jesus's message is not for those who wield disproportionate power, or are argumentative by nature, or who like to throw around their weight, or have to always be right. Rather, he is speaking to the people of the Beatitudes – to the merciful, the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and reconcilers, the poor in spirit, the persecuted and disenfranchised, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake. It is *they* whom Jesus encourages to be persistent and to not back down in the face of resistance. It is *they*, and all who seek to conform their lives to his, that he encourages “to pray always and not lose heart.”

The lesson from Genesis is about an *un*righteous man, who persists in going his own way, in *getting* his own way, and in latching onto that which he does not deserve. Jacob is as stubborn as they come. He is also a deceiver and a conniver and a usurper. His family is not off limits for his duplicity. In fact, it is at home that he perfects his craft. He cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright, and later dupes their father Isaac into giving him a blessing meant for Esau. He also pulls a fast one on his father-in-law Laban, who is himself no prize, and eventually prospers at Laban's expense.

As you might imagine, Esau takes umbrage at Jacob's manipulations. His rage boils, and he threatens to kill his brother just as soon as their father is safely in the grave. Upon hearing of this, their mother Rebekah hatches a plan to send Jacob, whom she has always favored, into exile. There he remains for 14 years. After many adventures and misadventures, including marrying first one, then another of Laban's daughters, Jacob decides to return to the land of his birth. He sends emissaries to Esau bearing gifts to appease him, and a message that he would like to be reconciled. The emissaries return with word that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob, accompanied by 400 men. Jacob is unsettled upon hearing

this – somehow the 400 men part just doesn't sound promising – so he does two things. He prays to God. Desperate times call for desperate measures. And he sends wave after wave of cattle to Esau – goats, sheep, cows and bulls, camels, donkeys – as a peace offering.

That night, Jacob arrived at the Jabbok River. Knowing that the day of reckoning is ahead, he sends his household on ahead and then settles down, alone, for the night. There by the river, exhausted by travel and by anxiety, he encounters a mysterious man with whom he wrestles all night long.

The author of Genesis tells us nothing at all about what set the two men to wrestling, or for that matter who the man is. At daybreak, when it is clear that Jacob is beyond tenacious, the mystery man attempts to break his will by dislocating his hip. That would have been enough to get me to let go of him, but Jacob insists that he will hold on as long as it takes, until his adversary gives him a blessing. So the mystery man switches to Plan B. "What is your name?" he asks. "Jacob," is the reply. "Not any more," says the mystery man. "From now on you shall be called Israel, because you have struggled with God." Actually, the translation we use says "for you have striven with God and with humans, *and have prevailed,*" but that does not seem quite right since Jacob does not prevail. At least not yet. Others translations of the Hebrew name Israel include "God strives," "God rules," "he saw God," and "the one made straight by God." (Commentary: <http://www.rev Kirsten.org/jabbok/commentary.htm>).

Jacob then asks his adversary "What is *your* name?" The answer comes back: "Why do you ask? So that you can *know* me? So that you can *define* me? That's will never happen. I am beyond your power to control and your power to define." And with that understanding, the mysterious being blesses Jacob – not in response to his demand, but as a matter of grace. Duly humbled, Jacob names the place where the blessing occurred "Peniel," which means "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Preserved, and transformed.

Most biblical commentators suggest that Jacob's adversary that night was the Almighty. This makes sense, given the mysteriousness of the encounter, the fact that the mystery wrestler eventually gives Jacob a blessing (although mere human beings could offer blessings as well in ancient Israel), and because Jacob himself

concluded that he had seen God face to face. But there are some who suggest that Jacob's adversary that night was his brother Esau. This view is supported by what happens when the much anticipated, and feared, reunion of the brothers occurs the next day. To Jacob's great surprise, Esau runs up to him, throws his arms around his neck, kisses him, and weeps. Deeply moved, Jacob says to Esau: "to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

A third interpretation of the encounter at the Jabbok is that Jacob wrestled with himself, that the struggle was internal, between the good Jacob and the bad Jacob, or to put it more theologically, between the fallen Jacob and the spark of the divine that continued to reside within him.

As it happens, these all amount to the same thing. Take your pick: soul wrestling with a transcendent God; physically wrestling with a transcendent God made flesh; wrestling with the God we recognize in another; wrestling with the God we glimpse in ourselves. However we experience it, the titanic struggle is over whether we are willing to accede to the divine invitation to live into our best selves.

Jacob's persistence in going his own way, in *getting* his own way, and in latching onto that which he does not deserve, leads to his undoing. But that undoing turns out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. It is not until he is broken in body and in spirit that he is able to recognize that it is God's rule, and God's will that matters. It is not until he is broken in body and in spirit that he is open to being renamed, reconstructed, recreated. It is only when he ceases to tell God what to do and instead listens to what God would have *him* do that he grows into the fullness of his being.

Perhaps I have been a bit harsh with Jacob. I should at least give him credit for engaging with God. Wrestling with God is way better than disengaging from God. Indeed, wrestling with God is often the most honest way in which we can maintain a connection with the Almighty. And sometimes it is the *only* way. It may well be that an essential reason for Jacob's return from exile was his desire to get right by God and by his family. Perhaps he had tired of all the games and all the shenanigans. Perhaps he had begun to wonder "Is this all there is to life?" It may even be that Jacob was the one who decided to engage in the wrestling

match. That on the eve of his encounter with Esau Jacob sought to reconsider how he had lived his life. If so, his congenital persistence worked in his favor, so that no matter how scary he found the all-night ordeal, and no matter how much he wondered whether all of this pushing and pulling was worth it, he hung in, and hung on, for dear life. Even after he was broken – which is a necessary step if we are to be remade – Jacob hung in there. And so he got his blessing, and his new name, and his new life.

And here's the thing. God hung in as well. God was willing to wrestle for as long as it took Jacob to work through whatever had to be worked through, and to then be open to change. God was willing to out wait all of Jacob's double dealing and chicanery, and to be there for him when he was ready to deal. When it comes to a model of persistence and holy tenacity, we need look no further than the One who would, and does, move heaven and earth to save us from ourselves and to create us anew. All we have to do is be willing to engage.

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