

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
October 21, 2007

**Pray, Persist, Prevail**

Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

I read this parable with the Session on Tuesday night,  
read it through twice, as is our custom,  
while the elders listened.

After reading it the second time,  
I asked as I often do: "What is this text about?"

After the usual pause,  
while everyone is deciding what they might say  
and whether they want to be the first to venture a comment,  
one of the elders said something like,  
"Well, this one is easy, right.  
It tells you what it's about in the first verse.  
It's about our need to pray and not lose heart."

I had to laugh and admit he was right.  
I had completely forgotten the first verse, even after reading it twice.

You know, it's funny,  
but every time I read this parable of Jesus,  
by the time I get to the end of what Jesus says,  
I have flat forgotten the gospel writer's little interpretation  
at the beginning.

I get to the end, and I'm bewildered.  
I think the early church was bewildered, too,  
so that Luke felt the need to add this little introductory explanation.  
But even with the Cliff Notes commentary in the first verse,  
Jesus' parable resists reduction  
and has it's way with our imagination.

It should not surprise us that Luke, alone of the 4 gospels,  
would include this parable.

It is a story about prayer,  
and Luke talks to us more about prayer  
than any other gospel writer.

On five occasions in his gospel,  
Luke adds a comment about Jesus praying  
that is not found in the other gospels.

This time the emphasis on our persistence in prayer.  
It's one of these "How much more..." parables.  
If even this calloused, self-serving judge  
    will answer the request of this poor woman,  
*how much more* will God respond with care  
    to the cries lifted up day and night  
    by the children of God!

If Jesus had just stopped there, I would have been fine.

But he presses the question of timing,  
asking, *Will God delay long in helping them?*  
    *I tell you, he will quickly grant them justice.*

And along with the picture of this woman,  
    persisting day after night and night after day,  
    we remember how we sometimes pray and pray and pray  
        and pray and pray and pray  
        and PRAY,  
    and down on our knees we struggle with God,  
    and we knock on God's door until our knuckles  
        are bruised and bleeding.

Sometimes it seems God is anything but quick in answering our prayers.  
But then that's not what Jesus asked, is it?  
He asked,  
    *Will God delay long in helping them?*  
Sometimes, the help we need comes in the struggle itself;

And he said,  
    *God will quickly grant them justice?*  
The word can be translated "justice" or "righteousness" –  
    In other words, God will *do what is right for them*.  
Like when my child wants to go outside without a coat,  
    God may delay me from what I need,  
    to provide me with something else I need.  
        In that delay, I experience struggle, even pain.

But it is just this kind of struggle with God that Jesus affirms  
    as the kind of faith that will endure  
    until the kingdom comes.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is interesting to note the contrast among the Abrahamic faiths:  
one faith, descended through Abraham's son Ishmael,  
is called *Islam*,  
which means "Surrender [to God];"  
while the other faith community,  
descended through Abraham's son Isaac  
is called *Israel*,  
which is interpreted in Genesis to mean  
"One who Strives with God."

Surrender to God. Strives with God.  
Two different approaches to the spiritual life.

Jacob, at the ford of the Jabbok, is blessed by God  
and given the new name *Israel*  
because he has striven with God and with humans  
and has prevailed.

It is a puzzling scene in the midst of a convoluted journey of faith.  
Years before that dark struggle,  
Jacob had been forced to flee the promised land  
because he had finagled his brother's birthright  
and stolen his father's blessing.  
Isaac was dismayed;  
Esau was enraged and ready to kill him.  
And on the way out, at the borders of the land,  
God spoke to Jacob in a dream at Bethel,  
a dream about a ladder going up to heaven.

But now, God has commanded Jacob to return to the promised land  
and Jacob is returning, prepared to face his brother Esau,  
for better or for worse.

But once again, at the borders of the promised land,  
at the ford of the Jabbok,  
God encounters Jacob.

God sneaks up on him in the middle of the night  
in the form of a man who wrestles with him until daybreak.

It's a little strange  
that the God who commanded Jacob to return,  
now assails him and holds him back,  
and forces him to struggle in order to follow God's way,  
a way that already seems difficult enough.

Alone, vulnerable, in the dark of night,  
there is at first no way for Jacob to recognize his assailant.  
For all he knows, it is Esau seething with years of rage and resentment  
come to settle the score.

As daylight draws near neither man has overcome the other.  
So the stranger strikes Jacob on the hip throwing it out of socket,  
and asks Jacob to release him before the day breaks.

"Not until you bless me," Jacob says,  
but it seems a ploy to get a glimpse of the face of his assailant  
in the growing light.  
Would it be his brother,  
or would he behold the face of God?

In either case, this shows great spunk on Jacob's part,  
for surely he knew the tradition which taught  
that "no one could see the face of God and live."

So the man bestows upon him a new name  
a name that affirms who Jacob has shown himself to be:  
*Israel*, one who strives with God and humans  
and prevails.

Israel, the father of 12 sons who will give rise to 12 tribes  
defined by persistence in the midst of struggle.

There is deep gospel here:  
God will not remain aloof,  
unapproachable in the heavens,  
removed from the plight of his creation,  
unengaged in the human struggle.  
God initiated this contact with Jacob.  
God entered human flesh and encountered Jacob  
face to face,  
hand to hand,  
flesh to flesh,  
breath to breath,  
voice to voice.

When Jacob is the most alone, most afraid, most vulnerable,  
God enters into the human struggle with him  
to do what is right for him.

As he moves on beyond the ford of the Jabbok,

Jacob, now Israel, walks with a limp.  
He walks away with a new name,  
and a new sign of his encounter with God.

\* \* \* \* \*

Today we have baptized two beautiful children.  
We like to walk them around and see their newborn sweetness,  
smell their heads, squeeze their toes.  
They are so innocent, and seem so fragile, so vulnerable.  
And yet it is also true that they have just endured  
the first great struggle of human life – birth!  
They have entered the human experience.

Today, Lillian and Maya have come through these waters,  
like the crossing of a ford into the promised land.  
And in these waters they begin the struggle of a lifetime,  
a life of striving with God and humans.  
And because God comes to these waters to meet them here  
Maya and Lillian receive a new name, the name of Christ,  
and are marked for all eternity with a sign,  
the sign of Christ.

Unlike the nameless woman who pestered a pitiless judge,  
these baby girls will grow up under the protection  
of a God who knows their names  
claimed by a Savior who will struggle with them  
until the very end.

So we will pray with and for these daughters,  
and we will teach them to pray.  
We will persist with them,  
and encourage them to be strong in their persistence.  
And we will know their names,  
and recognize the sign that we share –  
the Baptism by which we are marked .

Our assurance today for Lillian and Maya  
and for all who are in Christ,  
is that through prayer and persistence  
they will prevail.

That doesn't mean they will escape struggle, or be spared suffering.  
If anything, Christ will lead them more deeply

into the human struggle, and into suffering,  
into a striving, a wrestling with God.

But for one who is called by Christ's name  
and marked by the sign of the encounter with Christ,  
the struggle is never in vain,  
and the suffering is never without purpose.

Through it all, God will not delay in helping them.  
And God will do what is right for them  
so that their faith will endure when the Son of Man comes.