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**St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

*Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5; Luke 18:1-8*

## **Wrestling for Justice**

### **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 Peniel, limping because of his hip.

### **Luke 18:1-8**

Then Jesus told the disciples 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 the chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

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My little one is almost a year and half now and I think I deserve a medal - or maybe a championship belt. Miriam is an accomplished wrestler, though I have an edge because I'm in a different weight class. When there is something she doesn't want to do, she tries to run away until I can corner her. Then, she wiggles and squirms and does everything she can to escape.

It started with diaper changes when she would flip over and over. If she manages to take my phone or coffee cup, I have to chase her down and wrestle her to get it back. The other day, I had her in a scissor hold so that I could put pajamas on after her bath.

A couple weeks ago, when Miriam was sick, it took two of us to give her medicine—one to pin her down and one to get the medicine in her mouth. Through the whole thing, I tried reasoning with her. I kept telling her that this would make her feel better so she should stop wrestling, but we all know how well logic works on toddlers.

At times, I don't think my little one knows what she is wrestling or why, only that she is stuck in a wrestling mode. She ends up wrestling the wrong things.

This feels like a question for us right now - what are the things to wrestle with? It feels like some people readily accept things which I think we need to wrestle with, while I know I accept other things that make people wonder why.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus tells a parable about a widow who is wrestling with injustice. Jesus had just been asked by the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God would be coming. He told them that "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed - In fact, the kingdom of God is among you." [See Note 1]

Then, Jesus turned to the disciples. He told them about the signs of the end, when the kingdom will come in its fullness. The world will not be expecting it, instead everyone will be doing what is right in their own eyes. And then he tells them this parable, an exhortation to persistence.

Jesus doesn't tell us much about this widow, except that she is a widow and she is seeking justice. While she might have been a widow of means, it is just as likely that she was left with nothing. We find ourselves siding with the widow, sympathetic to her case, not because we know anything about her, but because we have heard about the character of the judge she faces.

Questions about the worthiness of the plaintiff fall aside when we know that justice is obstructed, when we know the judge neglects an obligation to justice. We side with the widow even though her community failed her, leaving her to wrestle with the unjust judge by herself. In light of her obstacles, she returns again and again, demanding justice in her case until finally the unjust judge relents because she has worn him down.

I don't want our community to fail people, leaving them to face injustice alone like the widow had to. It is hard to persist in wrestling when you are wrestling alone, yet I waver between wanting to wrestle it all and being too overwhelmed to do anything.

As much as I would like to identify with the persistent widow or to stand alongside her, I am more likely to be the unjust judge. I do not always do the good I want to do, nor do I always *want* to do what I ought to do. And if I do the good I know I ought, I do it so that others may see and praise *me*, not the one who created me and redeemed me.

I believe myself to be better than those I would cast as unjust, that I am *more* righteous, though I know being incrementally better won't earn me any points in heaven. None of us can enact justice perfectly for all people. None of us can keep the Law fully, and trying to justify ourselves by keeping the Law or serving our neighbors is impossible.

I give thanks that when I become an unjust judge, without fear of God or respect for people, God persistently calls me back. As Jesus tells us about God, he says "How much more will God grant us justice" than this unjust judge. God is not like this unjust judge at all, and neither does God reluctantly answer our prayers. Instead God gladly receives our pleas with love and showers us with grace.

Just as the widow returned time and again to the judge, God returns time and again for us. God's Spirit who dwells within us will not let us go, calling us back, endlessly drawing us into God's grace and mercy.

This is the depths of God's love for us. We can never do enough to thank God or serve God, yet God loves us. God will not leave us alone. God longs to bless all of God's people, to restore our world in goodness and wholeness.

Through Jesus's death and resurrection, God has defeated the power of sin and death. We cannot bring about justice and goodness ourselves - not only is the world's brokenness too big for us to tackle alone, but our own brokenness is too much for us to tackle alone.

In our baptism, we are united to Christ, joined to him in a death like his so we may also be joined to him in a life like his. Instead of us demanding to be blessed as Jacob did on the shore of the Jabbok, God blesses us and claims us as children at the edge of the font.

We may run away and wrestle with God, but as poet and painter Jan Richardson wrote,

"This is the blessing that visits you  
in the struggling, in the wrestling, in the striving.

This is the blessing that takes all night to find.

It's not that this blessing is so difficult,  
as if it were not filled with grace  
or with the love that lives in every line.

It's simply that it requires you to want it,  
to ask for it, to place yourself in its path.  
It demands that you agree to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,  
borne in the hands of the difficult angel who has chosen you,

do not let go.  
Give yourself into its grip.

It will wound you,  
but I tell you there will come a day when what felt to you like limping  
was something more like dancing as you moved into the cadence  
of your new and blessed name.”

[See Note 2]

In the wrestling, God gives you a new name—beloved child—and God will never let you go. In fact, God will wrestle with us until the Resurrection dawn when we will all be blessed. Amen.

Note 1: Luke 17:20-21

Note 2: Excerpts from Jacob’s Blessing <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/08/02/the-wrestling-is-where-the-blessing-begins/>