

NEVERTHELESS, SHE PERSISTED

A Sermon preached by Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron,
among the People of St. Mary's, Anchorage
Sunday, October 16, 2022

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

I like to give a title for sermons. Usually, this is the LAST step, and often an uneasy one. But today....today is easy.

Nevertheless, she persisted.

I'm glad that the title came so quickly, and so obviously—
because it drew my imagination away from today's first reading,
of that rascal Jacob in an all-night wrestling match.

I love that story.

One commentator calls it ““the best description of the life of faith in the entire Bible.”¹

It is so full of AGENCY; it is VIRILE and strong.....

Jacob wrestles, demands, questions....encounters G*d, and is changed by it.

This story is everything that I want to think that being a disciple of Jesus is like.

Nevertheless, she persisted.

A woman-without-a-man begs.

One with virtually no standing, asking for what she wants
from a disinterested and powerful other.

She has virtually no way of accomplishing justice,
particularly from a judge who, by his own admission,
cares nothing for God and does not respect persons.

Is this not the notion of faithfulness that we rail against?

¹ Rachel Wrenn, as quoted by Rolf Jacobson, at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/weary-pilgrims-in-exhausting-times>

When I think of this woman, I picture *abuelita*,

sitting on the porch and praying, “God’s will be done.”

Can this possibly be what Jesus calls us toward?

Is *this* what we who choose to follow Christ have said “yes” to?

You, likely, have already seen my mistake.

Already my image minimizes the woman,

my vision so culturally conditioned by my ideas of power that I cannot see what Jesus sees.

And then....I was changed by the hymn that Luke chose for us this morning, that we sang just before reading the Gospel.

Jesus describes a FORCEFUL woman....she knew that she had power, too, and trusted the strength that she knew...wielding stubborn trust.²

Thank you, Luke.

She may appear impotent to us, nevertheless, she persists.

And she persists—not in praying “Thy will be done,”

but in a prayer for justice

which, of course, is also a prayer for healing—

as true justice is always reconciling the brokenness of relationships between humans, between humans and creation, humans and God.

Justice restores.

It’s easy to dismiss the widow’s prayer as silly, or Pollyannaish.

However, I have seen – and I bet you have, too,

faithful folx who have precious little agency that the world recognizes

except that they HOLD ON

they persist in promise that what *is*, is not what *ought to be*,

and that what ought to be, is possible.

² *Voices Found #25*

This way of being is not nearly as trendy as cynicism,
 yet it is the Way that Jesus calls us toward.

I want to step back and say what I am NOT saying.

I am NOT saying that God is an elected judge, waiting polling Human for what Ought to Be,
 and waiting until enough petitions have been received
 before acting.

Jesus is NOT providing us with a formula for praying that says that we can obligate God to act
 in history in the way that we want.

I will not-because I cannot-describe exactly how prayer works, in some mechanical sense.

But here is some of what I have seen –

- As Frederick Douglas has said, “Power concedes nothing without demand.”
 - Whatever other resources we lack, we can demand, tenaciously
- In the face of justice denied by disinterested, authoritarian, or even evil systems and persons, an articulated view of justice matters.
 - What comes more naturally, for some of us, is a pattern that notices (even *relishes*) injustice and brokenness in others and in our selves.
 - At least part of what this sort of praying/begging/believing does is it sets us up to notice small, incremental, barely perceptible breakthroughs of clarity, insight, justice, and reconciliation.

I know a woman who credits her sobriety to a woman much like the widow in Jesus’ story.

There was a woman in town who prayed for her every day,
 and who told those she was praying for.

I think of how likely she was to see small moments of bending toward Good and Light.

Similarly, Andre Lorde “From the day my son was born, I told him every morning,

*“You are a child of God. God loves you. There is no one greater than you but God.”*³

Adapting Rev. Dr. Martin Brokenleg, speaking of resilience, and I ascribe to faith:

[Faithfulness] does not mean that you aren't wounded.

It does not mean that you aren't limping.

It means that you are here.

You're able to get up one more time when life knocks you down.ⁱ

From the life of Martin Brokenleg, and the Other Martin, I will add:

You don't simply get up. You don't just walk away, limping.

You get up because your faith is stubborn
and your vision of a just world is relentless.

You speak it in season, and out of season,
when your power is obvious, and when it is not.

Knowing this-noticing this, will get us into “good trouble,”
and, if Jesus is to be believed, it will change the world.

The notion that ““The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long, But it Bends Toward Justice” is not true because
of some sort of moral determinism,
nor is it magical thinking.

Rather, it is true because people pray, and wrestle.

It is true because a limping, begging People
dare to follow Jesus
and their prayers and their wrestling pull it toward justice.

This week – even this week!

I suspect that we will encounter places of injustice/broken systems/fracture relationships
where we have just about as much ability to affect change as a 1st century woman-with-no-man.

³ Forward to 2022 Edition of *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

Nevertheless, let us persist.

Let us SPEAK for justice,

even BEG.

ARTICULATE what justice looks like, and

NOTICE moments when love and grace and forgiveness and reconciliation break through.

I am grateful to limp along with you. Amen.

¹ From address given at University of Winnipeg, upon receiving from UofW an honorary doctorate.