

Sermon 10:21 Luke 18:1-8, Genesis 32:22-32

So I've been having some experience with bureaucracy this week. I was in a small car accident this week-nothing serious- someone lost a tire on the road and I ran into it, and it busted up my front bumper and cracked my radiator, so rather than focusing on God and worship and all of you, I've spent my time fighting through red tape and banging my head against insurance companies who have no interest in giving me money. This is not, of course surprising, it is their job not to give me money, so I've been trying to stay both pleasant and persistent. Yes, the wheel came off of her car, and slid in front of me, and no I couldn't avoid it, you see I was in the middle of a highway with traffic on both sides, and no I didn't see her spin out, I saw her wheel, and yes it was her wheel, it matched exactly her car, and yes, my name is Samuel Voth Schrag, and yes, I have her information, and here it is, and oh, you need to transfer me to someone else? Fair enough, go ahead and do that, I'm a preacher, I can repeat myself all day.

So I know first hand what Jesus is talking about in this parable. It is amazing what pleasant persistence can get you. If you keep bugging people, more often than not, you'll get what you want. Kids by the age of, oh, 2 know this fact. My brother used it to great effect to get us our first Nintendo Entertainment System in about 1986. (He was cuter than me, so it was his job to do the pleading).

This is sort of the template for all of Jesus' parables, almost all of them take situations that would have been immediately familiar to his audience, and would have usually had some humorous components, and uses that situation to make a significant theological point. Of course, our culture is a little different than first century Palestine, so we have to do a little more work sometimes to translate a story that relies on insider knowledge and specific understandings of the world into a more modern idiom, but this parable translates clearly today. Some things may change, but bureaucracy looks pretty much the same as it always has.

However, like all of the parables, even when the situation is quite familiar, it still makes you think. Jesus' little stories are rarely completely straightforward. This one in particular has always been rather troubling for me-you see, I don't get much comfort out of this parable. The parallel between the unjust judge and the heavenly father hits a little too close to home. That whole 'will God wait to bring justice' business? Well, the widow got what she wanted eventually, even if it took a lot of time, but I promise you this-no matter how hard you pray, you may still be disappointed. There have been people who have prayed for one thing for decades without relief, for generations Christians have prayed 'give us this day our daily bread and still some go hungry. Justice? Justice quickly? Life isn't fair-and those who think that it is usually start blaming poor people for their suffering rather than paying attention to the fundamental structural inequalities in the global economic system.

Sometimes, my relationship with God feels far too much like the relationship between the widow and the unjust judge than I would like.

Sometimes it feels to me like I call out to God, I seek God's wisdom, I attempt to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, and I'm left with doubts, with uncertainty, with suffering and misunderstanding. It feels like faith is a battle, rather than a gift, that God's presence is elusive, and the world far too broken to expect justice anywhere but at the end of time. The notion that God will swiftly bring justice seems laughable someday, in the face of a cosmos that is so categorically unswayed by appeals to goodness or righteousness. It sometimes feels like competition is at the heart of the universe, not everlasting and abounding love.

Somedays I'd be happy to have an unjust judge, watching from heaven, so that I could be confident if I appealed enough times, and with enough faith, something would indeed happen.

But the world does not work that way, and God does not work that way. Which means, I think that we have to look a little more closely at Jesus' words, and ask what they have to offer us, how they might offer comfort or guidance to a people seeking to follow God.

There are three things I'll point out this morning. First, I cannot read this parable and fail to ask what it means to bring justice. The parable is steadfastly opaque on this question. The widow wants 'justice' against her adversary, the judge grants her 'justice' and God will grant 'justice' to the chosen people. But what does justice mean? The greek word *ekdikosen* is an interesting word-it means vengeance, or retribution, which we often translate justice to take the edge off. It is a technical, legal term as well. It is something you would say in a court of law-give me justice against the ones who are unfair to me. It is an appeal to a higher authority to set right relationships between individuals. When we hear 'justice' we usually think about it in a larger, more cosmic sense: justice means getting what we deserve in all walks of life. I don't think its entirely fair to imply that Jesus is talking about the same sense of 'just deserts' for individuals here.

Second, I think its worth noting Jesus' final comment here-but when the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth? When we think about justice-who deserves it, and who does not, I expect our perspective is pretty skewed. I know what I think I deserve from the insurance companies, We rarely think of ourselves as the adversary that the widow may be taking to court, we rarely think of what it might look like for God to bring justice. I confess I'm not sure that people in the United States would come out as well as we might think.

Finally, of course, we have the question of what it means for justice to come quickly. Obviously, 2000 years doesn't feel quick to us, but on the other hand, the span of years

allotted to each human being is a pretty quick timeframe, cosmically speaking, though it often feels long from our perspective. It is only in the sense that we are limited to this lifetime that God waits too long to bring justice.

I don't offer these as solutions to the challenge of this parable-I still feel like God often compares poorly to the unjust judge, but I think they do help me reorient my perspective toward the divine. And I think that is important-because our relationship with God is never static, and the things that frustrate us today may be the aspects of the world that give us hope and faith tomorrow. There isn't any 'one answer' about how our relationship with God ought to look, and like all relationships, sometimes God can drive us nuts, and sometimes give us peace and joy in remarkable ways.

And the Bible respects these challenges, and does not insist that there are easy answers we bring to the text. Our relationship with God is as much like a wrestling match as a cooperative effort. In particular, the Old Testament is full of characters who seem to have honest and complicated relationships with God and with other people-characters that strike us not as saints, but as broken humans like ourselves-people who got themselves in and out of trouble, who were motivated by the basest of human desires, who listened to God and refused to listen to God as the mood struck them. This morning, I'd like to leave you with the story of Jacob. I think this story speaks to our relationship with God, and the challenges of a persistent relationship with the divine. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the great patriarch, and the man who is considered the father of Judaism and Islam, and by extension, Christianity. Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was Abraham's second son, and the first son by Sarah. Now Jacob LOVED conflict. Even within the womb, he was a fighter. He had a twin, Esau, and they jostled their mother, Rebekah, so severely she complained to God about their fighting. When he was born, Jacob was born second, but he came out clutching the heel of his Older brother, Esau, which is how he got the name "Jacob" which means 'he grasps the heel.' Which described Jacob pretty well, since grasping the heel is somewhere in between the English idioms of pulling someone's leg, and stabbing someone in the back. For someone who got himself in so much trouble for lying, well, it is appropriate that he might be named for trouble.

Anyway, the two boys grew up, and they continued to bicker at every opportunity, and their parents didn't help matters much anyway. Rebekah always took Jacob's side, and Isaac always took Esau's side, and neither side had a moments peace. Jacob ended up with Esau's birthright by badgering him at a moment of weakness, and later Rebekah helped Jacob steal his father's blessing by dressing up as Esau when his father was on his deathbed, and claiming to be his brother. Three times his father asked him who he was, and three times he lied, saying "I am Esau, your firstborn." Can you imagine what it would take to lie to your father as he was dying?

Through his chicanery, Jacob ended up with the blessing of the firstborn and the promise of the property of the firstborn, but Esau played to his strengths, and drove Jacob out of town through on pain of death.

It was at this point, driven away from the only home he had known, and without family, that Jacob first met the God of his grandfather Abraham. He falls asleep, with a stone as his pillow, and he sees a beautiful vision—a stairway to heaven, with angels traveling up and down, and above all God almighty, who delivered this promise:

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."

Pretty cool, huh? A significant blessing, and one that would have thrown Abraham into fits of obedience. Not Jacob. He hears the voice of God from on high, and his response is to start bartering with God. The deal is this God, "If God will be with me, and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Which to your faithful narrator seems pretty bold, but what do I know?

If you thought this theodicy was going to send Jacob into fits of piety, you don't know him very well. Rather, he traveled onward to the home of his uncle, Laban, and there he had even more trouble. He had the most tempestuous relationship with his uncle you could imagine. He ended up with two wives because Laban tricked him (Leah and Rachel) ended up with more than his fair share of Laban's flocks because of a complicated breeding scheme, and fled while Laban was out of town in an attempt to avoid trouble. This attempt failed, and it required God's intervention to avoid being killed by his father-in-law for fleeing with his daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, a good deal of his flocks, and the household Gods, and even after God intervened Laban strongly suggested he shouldn't come back to Haran ever again.

Thus, Jacob found himself, rich, yes, with two wives, two concubines, and 13 kids, yes, but stuck nonetheless. Stuck between a rock and a hard place. Stuck between a brother he had betrayed twenty year's earlier and an uncle who didn't trust him farther than he could than he could throw him. Yes, it seemed that his father's blessing had taken—he had money, and the seasons smiled on him, and it seemed like his barter with God was going Ok, he had clothes and hadn't gotten himself killed yet, but that didn't mean he was comfortable. But he couldn't go back to his uncle, so forward it was. He sent a message to his brother, saying he had returned, with a lot of money, and hoped for the best.

Instead, he got this: "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" and Jacob prayed to God, fearing that his brother was going to come and slaughter him and his family.

Also, to cover his bases, he sent the lion's share of his servants and his flocks in three bunches on ahead, as a sacrifice to appease his brother.

Which brings us to our story for this morning-after having prepared as best he could for every eventuality, both temporarily and divinely, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, [\[a\]](#) because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, [\[b\]](#) saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, [\[c\]](#) and he was limping because of his hip.

Therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.