

## Talk About Stubborn!

[Texts - Luke 18:1-8;  
Genesis 32:22-31]

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Today's scripture readings present two powerful pictures of persistence. In our first reading, Jacob tenaciously holds on to his opponent in an all-night WWE smack-down wrestling match. And in our second reading, Jesus tells the story of a determined widow, whose rugged resolve finally wears-down a hard-hearted judge. Both stories offer examples of the importance of perseverance. In the case of Jacob, holding-on for dear life was really a *way* of life. For the widow, crying-out for justice was the only way to safeguard her life and to obtain a fair outcome. This morning, I want to talk about these two persistent people, and then talk about another One, whose stubborn tenacity far surpasses theirs.

Jacob was the second son of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. His twin brother, Esau, was entitled to receive their father's cherished blessing, and inheritance because he was born first, though just barely. Clinging to his heel was his twin brother Jacob, coming right after him! And that's how it would be throughout their lives. *Jacob* [which means "usurper" or "grabber"] would use his quick wit and stealthy skills to get the better of his intellectually slower, yet stronger brother Esau. The epitome of Jacob's scheming and grabbing comes when he tricks his blind and dying father into giving him his final blessing. [And in that ancient culture, once a word of blessing was spoken, it couldn't be reclaimed or re-issued.] Therefore, when Esau arrives at his father's death-bed for his final blessing, Isaac has to say to him, "Sorry son, but your brother has deceived me and beat you to it!"

Of course Esau is furious! He swears that, as soon as their father is dead, he's going to kill his brother! So, Jacob decides to go away for a while - for health purposes. He goes to visit his uncle Laban, in the land of Haran. Jacob stays there for many years, marries *both* of Laban's daughters [another outlandish story of convoluted deception] and finally decides that it's time to return home, in the hope that his brother has gotten over all those dirty tricks that Jacob pulled. As he gets close to home, anxiously anticipating how this "family reunion" might work out, Jacob has an extremely restless night. Though he is alone, out of nowhere, a man appears; and they engage in an epic struggle. The story in *Genesis* is quite cryptic as to who this opponent is, thereby inviting speculation. One idea, is that Jacob is actually wrestling with *himself* - with his own conscience. He knows that he's done wrong, and that he has a knack for doing wrong. He's a schemer, who is highly skilled at using others to get what he wants. Yet there's also within him the desire to be a good and Godly person. He knows what's right; he just seems to have a hard time *doing* it. I imagine that some of us can relate to that: wrestling with our conscience, and hoping that our conscience wins the fight!

In Jacob's case, that fight takes on a human form, which seem appropriate. Throughout his life, Jacob has battled numerous people - his brother, his father, his uncle - and Jacob consistently wins! Jacob is the champ...but it sure doesn't feel like it, in that lonely night. For while he knew how to take advantage of his slow-witted brother, he never really took advantage of *having* a brother - and now he is feeling that emptiness. The last time he saw his father, it was to shamelessly deceive him - a terrible way to part with ones dying parent. And Jacob's departure from his Uncle Laban was really more of a quick get-away, with bad feelings on both their parts. Jacob certainly knew how to fight, how to persevere, how to "win." But alone in that dark night, he begins to realize that "winning" is actually "losing", when it drives

us to drive-away the important people in our lives, and isolates us from family and friends.

This raises a relevant question for you and me. In *our* lives, what's more important: to always prove ourselves right and "win"; or to be gracious with others, and at peace with ourselves? For most of his life, Jacob fights to get the best of others. But in that lonely night, he finally realizes that this is not the way that God intends Life to be lived. So he struggles with his own conscience; he wrestles with this other "person". Yet, before the dawn breaks, Jacob realizes that he's actually struggling with *God*:

The Divine Source of Truth, who speaks through his conscience;  
The Divine Creator of Life, who challenges him through the lives of those around him;

The Divine Spirit of Redemption, who strives with Jacob and finally compels him to give up his selfish, destructive ways, and to take hold of something far, far better.

Jacob the "grabber" is now grabbed by the Holy One, and becomes a new person, with a new name. He is now *Israel*, which means, "One who strives with God." Jacob does strive with God, and Jacob prevails, because he finally *lets go!* He lets go of his name; his selfish, possessive nature; even his ability to triumphantly strut, now that his hip is out of joint. Jacob finally loses a fight! Yet in his losing, he actually wins. He wins a new-found humility. He wins another chance with his brother. And he wins a new life, as Israel - the Patriarch through whom the Messiah will come. Jacob's persistence finally pays-off, but only because he is willing to let it go.

In our second reading, Jesus tells the story of a widow whose persistence pays-off only because she is *not* willing to let it go. This widow isn't striving against God, but against an ungodly, unresponsive judge. By the judge's own admission, he doesn't fear God, or respect anyone; however, because this widow keeps

pestering him, he finally decides to grant her justice. He doesn't do it because he knows it to be right, he simply does it so that she'll just leave him alone. That raises an important insight for you and me to remember. In the struggle for justice, persistence is crucial, because those who would deny justice to the oppressed, often do *not* fear God, or respect other people. That's why it's so critical that you and I tirelessly use whatever influence we have, to speak out for those poor and vulnerable people whose rights are routinely ignored or systematically suppressed.

In the patriarchal society of Judea, this widow would have no property, no inheritance, and no personal rights. Unfortunately, she also has no one to champion her cause. Her only recourse is to stubbornly take-on this hard-hearted judge. And though it would seem like a lost cause, Jesus gives this story a surprising twist, by making that widow victorious. Then he raises the key point of his story: If this callous, unjust judge will finally do the right thing, imagine how readily a loving and compassionate God will respond to those who passionately seek justice! The important thing, Jesus says, is that we "do not lose heart" when praying for justice or in *working* for justice and peace. Sometimes the cause seems hopeless, and the obstacles overwhelming; however, Jesus reminds us that you and I are not alone in the struggle.

The spirit in us that desires a just and equitable world, flows from that Divine, Originating Spirit of Equality and Justice. And as much as you or I want peace on earth, the Holy One who created this world, certainly desires it even more. Our Divine Source of Conscience and Compassion relentlessly challenges us to make that Heavenly vision, a down-to-earth reality. Therefore, the tenacity of Jacob, and the perseverance of that widow, are *nothing*, when compared to the Divine determination that justice and peace prevail! So perhaps the moral of our readings is this:

Sometimes you and I need to let go, and trust completely in Divine Grace; and sometimes you and I need to hold-on, and trust completely in Divine Grace!

I'm sorry if that sounds like a simple paradox from a simple-minded pastor, but it's true! So I leave you with this simple prayer that may help: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*