

22 Pentecost C 2013  
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St. John's/Melrose Park  
October 20, 2013 "Wrestling with God"

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Family drama. [sigh] In 1966, my uncle Dick encouraged my dad to leave everything in Minnesota to start a new restaurant with him in San Diego. We sold our house, Dad quit his job, we went out there. Dad drew up the architectural plans and wound up working for Uncle Dick's franchise restaurant in the meantime. Until the day he saw the letter from the franchise headquarters accusing Dick of embezzlement. Within two months we sold the house we had just bought in San Diego and moved to Michigan, where Dad got a job in the business managed by Mom's stepfather. Forty years later, there was similar drama among my siblings. Maybe sometime I will tell the story of that family drama. But whenever I feel bad about my family drama, I just open my Bible to Genesis. Those people were a mess.

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way to meet his slightly older twin brother, Esau. The name Jacob means "supplanter," "usurper." And all his life, Jacob had lived up to that name. In the womb, he and Esau struggled and wrestled. When they were young men, the hungry Esau sold his birthright, which meant the right to 2/3 of their father's estate, to Jacob for a pot of stew. When their father Isaac was old and blind, Jacob, with the help of his mother, tricked their father into thinking that Jacob was Esau. So that Isaac would give his special blessing to Jacob, instead of his twin brother. Esau was really angry. Rightly so. Jacob escaped Esau's anger by running to their uncle Laban; where, eventually, Jacob went back to his old usurping tricks. But in the little bit of Genesis that we have for our first reading today, Jacob is on his way to meet his brother, after all these years. He sends his wives, children and belongings across the river. During the night, Jacob has a strange encounter. A man wrestles with him. All night. And dislocates Jacob's hip. Now we might psychologize this encounter as the wrestling of Jacob's conscience. But Jacob has not shown much of a conscience before this. As dawn neared, the man tells Jacob to let him go; but Jacob refuses: not until the man blesses him. The man asks his name and Jacob, strangely, gives it. Ancients believed that when you told someone your name, you gave them power over you. But Jacob saying his name is more than that – for Jacob, when he says his name, he confesses that he is a "supplanter," a "usurper" – someone not to be trusted. And we who have read the previous few chapters of Genesis know that to be true! Jacob confesses his supplanter name to the wrestling man, who, strangely, gives Jacob a new name: "Israel," which means "one who has wrestled with God and humans and prevailed." The wrestling man refuses to say his name, but blesses Jacob, now Israel.

So Jacob limps away – but with a blessing. And a much better name.

The woman who came seeking justice from the unjust judge was limping. At least, figuratively. She was a widow – that alone was sufficient to qualify as a disability, in Jesus' time. She was economically broken. Subject to her late husband's creditors, or those who claimed to be his creditors. She had no voice in her in-laws' household. But this widow had an additional reason for her limp. In a society without life insurance, or widow's benefits, or protection from her late husband's family, she was economically desperate. Her husband's debtors could lie and get away with it. So she went to the judge, who turned out to be unjust, uncaring. Jesus is not shy about characterizing the judge as someone "who neither feared God nor had respect for people." The widow in Jesus' parable went to the judge with a limp – and figuratively wrestled him, until she came away with a blessing. Until even the unjust judge gave her what she had cried out for.

We all limp around life. Sometimes our wounds are self-inflicted. Sometimes we have wrestled with demons we should have avoided. Family members who shouldn't be trusted. In the last couple of years I have found myself wrestling with my prejudices. Wrestling with our prejudices is tough, but rewarding. Even though it is so much easier to avoid that kind of struggle, allowing our pre-judgments to stand. I used to have negative judgments about people who had tattoos and rode motorcycles. Those are two prejudices I have had to re-examine in the last few years. Some of the most helpful people I've met were motorcyclists. And even hard-working, middle-class, middle-aged, mid-level managers are getting tattoos these days – so I've had to wrestle with the prejudice that I was taught about tattoos. And I was taught plenty of prejudices about people of color and nationalities other than British Isles – not just by my parents, but by our whole culture, our whole society. Even though I know that God doesn't care about appearances, that God looks on the heart and is concerned about faith in God, I've had to confront and wrestle with many of my prejudices. Each time I confront my prejudices, acknowledge my limp, I grow a little. . That wrestling is not easy; but worth it.

On this Sunday, we who are faith-descendants of Jacob have come to look for a blessing, to go with whatever limping we have been given. We who are faith siblings of the widow come to ask for justice, for the little we need to survive in this harsh world. For what we need to survive this presidential campaign! So much prejudice, so much pre-judging! It is like we are all limping and wrestling – and still waiting for a blessing.

Waiting for the good news? Here it is: like the widow in today's gospel lesson, God is persistent. God will keep at us until we are moved to do what God intends for us to do. God will make us wrestle with money issues, or our prejudices, or a family member, or illness, or whatever the struggle is for us at a given time. God will wrestle with us all night, or all year – however long it takes us to realize that we need a blessing – or to realize that have already received it. God will wrestle with us until we are ready to see God face to face – and recognize the love that prevails over the hard feelings we've been storing up inside. To grow we must wrestle. With God. With ourselves. With the opinions that we value most highly. Will they let us go with a blessing? Will we be changed, because of the wrestling? Will we walk with a limp, or be known as someone who is now different than before? We can pray for that – that God will bless us with change, with growth in faith and hope and trust, but most of all, love. Only then will we be face to face with God. Only then will we recognize the face of forgiveness. That we have encountered God. Amen