

Sunday, October 16, 2022
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24 (Year C)

Genesis 32.22-31; Luke 18.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/902855014014370>

(Sermon begins at about 17:15)

“Struggles”

You have to admit, life is full of struggles. Sometimes these can be pretty major. Struggles with challenging situations, finances, relationships, health issues. Struggles that may be ongoing and often have a significant impact on the shape or trajectory of our lives. Sometimes even struggles that come to define who we are in a significant way. And then there are struggles that are pretty minor in the grand scheme of things. Sure, in the moment, they may seem pretty overwhelming, but in actuality, not so much. Struggles that quickly fade into the background once resolved. Becoming little more than a distant memory, if remembered at all. Unless one lives an absolutely charmed life, or is completely delusional, we readily accept that challenges and struggles are an inherent part of our existence. And some would argue that without challenges and struggles, life is meaningless. Without challenges and struggles, there is no opportunity for growth, for change, for improvement.

Our spiritual life is no different. There are bound to be times of struggle as we seek to be faithful to our God. Particularly when the ways of the secular world bump up against and conflict with what God desires. Particularly when our own desires may conflict with what God would have us do. It is these struggles that provide opportunities for growth in our spiritual life and our relationship with God. Sometimes in major ways, such as struggling with a call to holy orders; and sometimes in more mundane ways, such as how to faithfully adhere to God’s commandments or decisions about what ministry program to become involved in or discerning how to respond to a particular situation, especially when societal norms may differ from religious norms.

Our readings for today all touch upon this subject of struggling in our spiritual life in one way or another. Our first reading from Genesis seems to best encapsulate this general sense of struggling in our spiritual lives.

After twenty years in Aram, where he married his wives, Jacob and his family are returning to his home territory of Canaan. Returning home is not without risk. As you may recall, the reason Jacob left Canaan in the first place was to flee the wrath of his brother Esau: Jacob’s twin brother, who happened to be the elder of the two. And as the elder, he was entitled to their father’s inheritance. But Jacob conned Esau out of his birthright and stole the inheritance, resulting in Esau vowing to kill Jacob. As Jacob prepares to enter Canaan, he knows he must eventually deal with Esau, who agrees to a meeting. The night before the meeting is to occur, Jacob camps on the banks of the Jabbok River. As we heard, what ensues is a struggle that is, admittedly, a bit ambiguous, even contradictory, in its details.

The entire account of the struggle itself is only five verses:

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."

We are initially told that Jacob's assailant was a man. But at the end of the all-night wrestling match, the assailant says "you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Admittedly, the writer of this section of Genesis often depicts God as being in human form with human characteristics. And yet, if God is all-powerful, how did Jacob prevail? Why was God not able to win the struggle? And why did God not know Jacob's name? If anything, Jacob's struggle on the banks of the Jabbok raise more questions than it answers. Which leaves the whole account open to all sorts of interpretation. Sure, it might have been God in human form. Or it might have been an angel sent as God's representative. Similarly, some of the ancients questioned whether the assailant might not have been a river demon. In more modern times, scholars have suggested that the struggle may not have been an actual physical struggle, the injury to Jacob's hip notwithstanding. That the struggle may have been more of a personal, metaphorical struggle on Jacob's part. Some sort of dream or a wrestling with his own psyche or conscience. Which is entirely possible if Jacob were feeling guilt about how he had swindled his brother out of his inheritance and was fearful of what might happen in his meeting with Esau.

So was Jacob's struggle with God? Or with an angel? Or with a demon? Or with himself, with his psyche? The likely answer? "Yes." It could have been any of these. Although the ambiguous nature of the account indicates that the truly important thing was that this was very personal for Jacob. Likely more of an internal struggle than physical. The ancients did not have the knowledge and understanding of the human psyche that we have today. So, it is entirely possible what is presented is a metaphorical description of a deeply personal, inner conflict—mental, emotional, and psychological. One that, given circumstances, was also rooted in conflicts regarding relationship. Definitely in his unjust treatment of his brother. And Jacob had just had a rather tense encounter with his father-in-law Laban. All of this coming together in his conscious and sub-conscious minds, creating an inner struggle. And being a person of faith, his personal struggle likely indicated a deeper spiritual conflict connected with God. With his understanding that what he had done had been counter to Divine law, and therefore reflecting upon the state of his relationship with God. To the point of potentially having an adverse impact on his relationship with God.

This being the case, Jacob's struggle provides an image of what our own internal struggles, and particularly in our spiritual lives, are like. Taking what is going on in our external lives, and bringing that into the deeper recesses of our being, into our thoughts, our hearts, our spirits, as a metaphorical struggle within ourselves. And depending on the nature of the issues, with the potential of becoming a struggle between us and our God.

The account of Jacob's wrestling match has even more to say about the nature of these struggles in our own spiritual lives. Of how we, and how God, deals with them. We are told that "the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob." And later on, when Jacob is given a new name, it is because he has "striven with God and humans, and . . . prevailed." This statement gives us two pieces of insight.

First is that in Jacob's inner struggle with himself and God, God did not win. The all-powerful God could not prevail against a mere human. What this tells us is that when it comes to our spiritual life, our life of faith, we ultimately have a choice. We have free will. God cannot make us do anything or cannot make us change our perspective. Well, he could. But that is not how God chooses to operate. Rather, God wants us to follow him and live according to his desires for us because we want to. Not because we are forced to. Only we have the power to change ourselves. Only we can make the choice to change our lives to be in accordance with God desires. Which results in the occasional struggle. And which is why the struggles in our spiritual lives can go on for extended periods of time. Because we have to struggle and struggle and struggle until we get to the point that WE want to change. Until we get the point that WE want to align our lives with God's purposes.

And second is that as a result of the struggle with God, Jacob received a new name, a new identity: Israel. A name that reflects who he is precisely because he struggled with God. Israel literally means "the one who strives with God." What this tells us is that when we struggle with ourselves, when we struggle with our faith, when we struggle with God, we are changed. We are not who we were before the struggle began. We come through the struggle with a new identity. As one who has struggled with God, as one who has struggled with ourself, and have prevailed. Of course, every time we have a struggle in our spiritual life, we do not change our name. But if we do the hard work the struggle entails and do prevail, we are, by definition, fundamentally changed. We move one step closer to who God has created us to be. To who God calls us to be.

Our Gospel reading for today gives us some additional understanding of struggling with spiritual matters. Jesus tells his disciples a parable to demonstrate the importance of prayer. Which is a key part of any struggle with spiritual matters—the need to maintain connection with God. The woman in the parable is a model for prayer. Namely, that we are to be persistent, even tenacious, in our lives of prayer. Jesus' intent is to expand the understanding of prayer. That prayer is more than just verbal communications with God. Prayer includes the whole life of the believer. The way of thinking, the way of viewing the world, the way of being in the world.

This is illustrated in the parable under the guise of the woman's persistence in seeking justice. Which sets up a struggle between her and the unjust judge. In this, we see parallels to Jacob's struggling with God in our Old Testament reading. The widow becomes a model for faithfulness in being willing to struggle and do the hard work to achieve her objectives. In the parable, that is the desire for justice. But in a broader context, it is the desire to live more fully into God's vision for the world. To live into her part of bringing about that vision.

In her tenacity, there is also an unwritten supposition that there is value in the struggle. Not that God will always grant what we ask if we are persistent enough. The real message is that

struggling in the spiritual life, particularly when seeking the fulfillment of God's desires, has inherent value. It is in the struggling that we come to a better, more complete understanding of God's ways. This comes about through the very prayer that the widow embodies. In the willingness to continue in the struggle, to keep communications with God open, providing for the opportunity to gain insight and clarity. All of which will help inform the decisions we make in how to proceed in our own spiritual life.

If we are willing to do the hard work of struggling with our faith, with our spiritual life, and if we are faithful in seeking to engage God in the struggling, we are assured that we will prevail. Not only prevail but be transformed as we gain greater insight into who God is. As we gain greater understanding of who we are as beloved children of God. And in deepening our relationship with the One who strengthens and sustains us in all the other struggles we face in our lives.