

## **Sermon, 21 October 2007—Proper 24**

Genesis 32:3-8,22-30; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14—4:5; Luke 18:1-8

And you find yourself gripping an adversary, but who it is—how can you tell in the dark? Strong, yes, because you can hardly catch your breath. Skilled, yes, because whenever you think you've purchased a foothold, your opponent wrenches you off balance, and you stagger, and cling, and grind your teeth. Cunning, yes, because, every blow of yours is blocked and parried, even anticipated, and you are reduced to locking your arms around this writhing torso that pivots to hammer blows on you from above. And there is no rest: every time you turn your face away or close your eyes or drop your head, gasping, your antagonist strikes, punches your air out of your gut, clouts your teeth loose in your jaw, shatters your eyesight into flashing blindness with a fist to your skull. Not far from you, on the other bank of this narrow brook, people are asleep, but you cannot even breathe deeply enough to cry out for help. You wonder where the pain is, how long before the bruises will blossom, swollen with pain, how long before you will have the leisure to suffer the pain, that in this struggle you barely sense as dull pressure. And you hear inside you cracking and tearing and snapping, and your hip slips impossibly within its sheath of flesh, out of its socket, no longer supporting your weight. Now finally you understand that if you lose this struggle, you lose your life. But you cannot fall, because your arms are clamped around your contender's ribs, who twists in your clutch to break away, who drags you, trying now finally to escape a fight that cannot be won. There, in the east, now finally, a chilly dawn; how, in God's name, could this have gone on all night? But still you're standing, fastened onto this bitter crippling power, who mutters now, "Let me go, the sun is rising!"

And now, through gritted teeth, you hiss, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me! Give my life meaning and purpose and strength and joy.”

Or you rise from a bed that will always feel empty when you enter it, empty when you leave it, empty when you see it, since the one you love is no longer there, and you gather again what you need to show the judge, and leave the house that you cannot believe will be empty when you return to it, all you and your child have left. And you are afraid to leave, because each time you go away and return, your neighbor has made a further invasion, deeper into all you have left, removing what is yours, installing what is his, smiling when he meets you in the street, smiling in the presence of the judge who dismissed your case, smiling as he strolls past what you and your husband planted and tended for so many years. And you have already been patient; and you have already been firm; and you have already been tearful; and you have already been angry; and your neighbor smiles, and the judge shrugs. But this is all you have left, all that remains of what you and your husband built together, all that can feed and shelter you in an uncertain encroaching future, all you can pass on to the child who is not yet old enough to understand that this must take all your time for now. This is not something you would prefer to have, or would be interested to have, or would find it inconvenient not to have; this is *all* you have—but the judge sees neither benefit nor loss to himself in your case and shrugs, and your neighbor smiles. This is no longer about being right or doing right or having a right; this is about survival. This is no longer about advocates or deputies; this is about urgent personal crisis. Your world has boiled itself down to this. Forget self-respect, forget reason, forget courtesy; those are the entertainments and adornments of the powerful. Forget the socially respectable norms of shame and honor: stand outside the tribunal, wait by

his door, meet him at the gate of his house, stop him in the street, and confront him at the top of your voice, because if you lose this struggle, you lose your life, so you cry, “Give me justice and dignity and hope and peace!”

That, my dear sisters and brothers, is the heat our prayer ought to be able to withstand. This is not the normal condition of our life; we could barely endure this on a daily basis—though folks in the warring regions of the world do. We would turn into bug-eyed mystics weeping into our soup if we prayed like this. However, we know that life brings us to moments, whether or not we are ready for them, when we will be on our knees before God, struggling with something that seems to implicate every bit of us, some habitual ugliness that has become unbearable, some surprising gift greater than we dared hope for; and in those moments, we suddenly see what our life has been about, what gives it meaning, what faces a change.

The human contradiction is that we both want and do not want this: we want to feel alive and engaged, but cannot tolerate the intensity. Great pain and great joy both are blazing lights that search out and show our heroism and our pettiness, but our body itself is unable to sustain their fierce glow for long and shuts down. No true soldier wants battle, but all true soldiers understand that battle is what they have prepared themselves for. The struggle is the proof of the virtue. Something in our depths wants to temper our goodness and to know its worth. We are as appalled by those who seek this out as we are by those who flee when it finds them. Jesus understood our human entrapment in this contradiction and taught us to pray, “save us from the time of trial”—compassionate words, because human beings are both glorious and frail. He himself prayed, “Let this cup pass from me”—humble words, because he was both willing and weak. Jacob and the widow have entered the time of trial; you and I have and will.

Jacob, whom we see wrestling this mysterious assailant, was a treacherous man. He cheated his older brother of both birthright and blessing, then fled to save his life. Settled in a new home, he cheated his father-in-law, then fled to save his life. This morning we glimpse him caught between these two homes where he is not welcome, and his older brother is approaching. He is finally at bay, and like any animal at bay, he lashes out: he wrestles all night with an unknown figure. Here is the most graphic depiction of the torment of anger, fear, guilt, shame, self-loathing, and ferocious will-to-live in all of the Bible. He sees no way forward across the Brook Jabbok towards reconciliation, convinced that his brother intends to kill him, unable to comprehend how he might begin to atone. He grips the supernatural being in combat all night long. With a dislocated hip, he won't let go. At dawn, he won't let go. Without a blessing, he won't let go. The unnamed widow in Jesus' story is just as ferocious: until the judge delivers to her the justice that she feels in her bones is her due, she will not let go.

Jesus says, "At those times, even at all times, pray like that; even though you know God is eager to give you all good things, don't lose heart, but pray always white-hot with intensity, burn with focus, and pierce your ignorance like an arrow shot through a cloud." Jesus understands the danger of any blandly positive picture of God, when we have not given up on our self. God, the benign force we take for granted, we confuse with something created to fulfill our hopes. Oddly, when our first goal is self-preservation, the love of God does not make us grateful; it makes us complacent. We slowly turn into the judge, neither fearing God nor respecting people. When we install ourselves at the center of our universe, we ought not to be

surprised that the Heavenly Visitor finds no faith on our earth. Nothing has extended us beyond our self, outside our self; how could we have faith?

Both Jacob and the widow discovered something that mattered more to them than self-respect and self-possession. A dislocated hip was not too high a price; the dislike of the judge was worth the cost. What would you do for a blessing? What would you do for justice?

Think now, for a moment, that Jacob is Israel, and in his loins are the entire Jewish people. Think of that people, wounded by God, but refusing to let go—in Babylon, in Venice, in Warsaw, in Auschwitz—for the sake of the blessing bestowed on them in being called as God's Chosen People. Think of that people calling on God for justice. They are not alone in demanding a blessing and crying out for justice. Think of the cries from the Sudan, from Iraq, from Myanmar, even in our own country....

What I want to know is what here matches those cries in intensity? Knowing that we dread the time of trial, knowing that we cannot sustain the embrace of life at its rawest, even so we ought to have a sense of what would be worth the struggle, of what would cost too much to lose. What here, at St. John's in Saint Cloud, is worth wrestling with God for night and day in order to obtain blessing? What is not yet here the fullness of that welcome, that entirety of inclusion and partnership, that unhesitating gift of the self, which becomes the foundation of just relationships among people? What is it that we ought to demand night and day of God here, because to lose that struggle, would be to lose our life?

The Purpose and Ministry statement that the Vestry has been working on is only the first step. For each of us, the question is: does any of that matter to our core, speak to our heart, awaken us in the middle of the night, cause us to head out of our home seeking justice? Does any of it cause us to

leap up and to grab hold and to tell each other, “this, if we fail at this, we have lost our life”? What aspect of our life together ought we to cling to, even if we know we have begun to limp, and say, “We will not let this go until it becomes a blessing to all of us, to all who join us, to all who visit us, to all who do not yet know us”? Is there anything for which we would go to the City of Saint Cloud, which neither fears God nor respects people, and demand justice, equity, right relationship, the dignity of every human being, some action which, if we neglect it, increases the suffering of the world?

I know we cannot live at that edge forever. But when we find what really matters, what is essential to us, we also find the energy to engage it, and the courage to give our selves to it, and the joy and gratitude that we are co-creators with God of the new creation in it. The One who watches over us neither slumbers nor sleeps, and shall keep us safe, and shall guard our going out and our coming in, until we enter into the undying praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, the One God, whose will it is to bless us and to make us a blessing, and whom we praise this day.