

Brothers Jacob and Esau have had a pretty severe falling out because Jacob stole his brother's birthright: a double portion of the inheritance, headship of the clan, and covenant representation before the Lord; it was the physical inheritance that he stole.¹ And their father's blessing – the invocation of divine protection and prosperity – that went to Jacob as well because he literally fleeced Esau of what was rightfully his.² The book of Genesis recounts their story and tells us that after these thefts, "Esau hated Jacob...and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."³ Esau doesn't just *hate* his brother, he cherishes the animosity he holds for Jacob and is plotting his brother's demise.

Jacob gets word of the plan and, understandably scared for his life, he escapes to live with his uncle, but he has to leave behind the birthright: the physical inheritance.⁴ Though Jacob has abandoned the family and all of his possessions, Esau is still not able to take back what is rightfully his, and so Esau leaves home as well and takes up residence in the land of Edom.

Years pass and the relationship between Jacob and his uncle sours, and God calls on Jacob to return to the land of his father from which he escaped years earlier. All well and good, but there's a problem: Jacob must pass through the land which Esau now occupies – to get home, Jacob will have to meet with his brother.

Jacob's convoy arrives at the boundary waters between the hill country of Gilead and the land of Edom, where Esau lives. In an attempt to assuage his brother, Jacob sends waves of gifts to Esau until all that Jacob has left with him is his family: two wives, two maids, and eleven children, all who are eventually sent across the river as well.

And Jacob is left alone.

¹ Genesis 25:29-34

² Genesis 27

³ Genesis 27:41, *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

⁴ Genesis 27:42-45

Can you imagine the worries and fears that flooded Jacob's mind as he realizes what he must do? Years ago Jacob took *everything* from Esau; not only that, but Jacob then abandoned it all; Esau's birthright – the one stolen from him – stared at him every day until he couldn't take it any longer and he had to move far away from home. Jacob destroyed Esau's life, and now Jacob is going to have to face his brother.

And it's not going to be a fair fight, if it comes down to that because what does Jacob have to defend himself with? A herd of camels, some servants, and a plethora of goats? He can't even talk his way out of being guilty because *everyone* in the family knows what happened. Jacob needs that divine protection his father blessed him with years ago. Jacob knows that when the time comes, he will have to present to Esau a changed man, a new man – no longer one who cheats, no longer "Jacob the thief" – but someone who has done the difficult work to make reconciliation possible. Jacob *needs* God, more than ever, Jacob *needs* God to go with him.

There on the river bank, Jacob isn't alone for long – a man shows up and wrestles with Jacob all through the night. And Jacob is standing his ground so well that the man knocks Jacob's hip out of its socket in an attempt to prevail against Jacob. But the unsportsmanlike conduct doesn't work, so the man demands to be let go but Jacob refuses: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."⁵

Remember that blessings are an invocation of divine protection and prosperity – Jacob needs to know that God is going with him to meet with Esau because he can not do this alone. Jacob needs to know that no matter what will happen, God will be right there with him. Jacob needs to see God face to face because all of those divine promises of protection and prosperity seem so far out of reach right now. This is his last chance to get what he needs; Jacob needs God, and so, in the midst of this great wrestling match he cries out: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me!"

These days it seems like our prayers are futile: the economy isn't getting better, groceries aren't getting cheaper, affordable healthcare is becoming unaffordable. The world celebrated the return of the Israeli hostages but has turned a blind eye to the continued

⁵ Genesis 32:26, *NRSVUE*

extermination of the Palestinians in Gaza. We pray for common-sense gun reform but it seems like it's never a good time to talk about doing that work. We pray that one cancer in our body would go away, only for a different one to develop.

We pray for an end to the mass deportations but people – documented or not, citizen or not – men, women, and children are being kidnapped by our government and are being deported. We pray and we pray and we pray, and we wait, and we wait, and we wait. These days it seems like our prayers are futile. These days we have to be persistent – no, we have to be stubborn like Jacob. Stubborn as a mule, stubborn. Stubborn as a toddler who needs his sleep but refuses to go to bed stubborn.

I will not let you go, unless you promise to protect me! Guarantee me that you'll be right here with me. I am persistent, God...no, no, I am more than persistent; God, I am as stubborn as a mule and I am not going anywhere until you tell me what I need to hear.

This woman in Jesus' parable – this widow seeking justice – she is this kind of stubborn. Day after day she stands before this judge who doesn't care about who gets help or who gets injured. He sticks to the facts and metes out justice as *he* sees fit and this woman's case does not demand his attention. But she keeps coming back. She keeps coming back, day after day after day. She comes every single day and she demands one thing: justice.

I will not leave you alone, unless you give me justice. I will not leave you alone, unless you guarantee that you will stand right here and listen to my case. I am stubborn, your honor, and I am not going anywhere until you tell me what I need to hear.

This widow has dug in her heels and unless you're delivering justice, it's like talking to a brick wall. Her stubbornness keeps her feet planted in the truth and it gives her the confidence to demand what has been promised to her. And it pays off! The widow's stubbornness pays off! Listen to how Eugene Petersen tells the conclusion of this parable: He [the judge] never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, "I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this

widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice – otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.”⁶

The judge caves under the pressure of the widow! He's afraid that she's going to shake him down until she gets justice! She's going to give him black eyes until she gets what she needs! This man of power and authority didn't fear God and he didn't care what other people thought of him, but this little widow has him shaking in his sandals. And Jesus then tells us what this parable is all about; he says to his disciples: “Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet.”⁷

With this parable, Jesus is telling his disciples that they need to pray like Jacob – they must grab hold of God with all of their faith and they must say: “I will not let go, unless you bless me!” *Be as stubborn with God as this little widow is with this powerful judge!* says Jesus.

And Jesus is telling his disciples that just as the widow *went* to the judge every day, so too, you must *go* to God every day. God is always right there – it's you that must do the going – it's you who, when you wake up, the first words out of your mouth in the morning and the last words out of your mouth in the evening are directed at God: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me!”

And Jesus is telling his disciples that just as the widow goes back to the judge day after day, you, as well, must go to God day after day. The widow is consistent in her persistence and she never gives up. Though she hits a wall, she keeps going. Though she stumbles, she keeps going. Though she has no more words, she keeps going. Though she knows – even though she *knows* that the judge won't hear her, she keeps going! Every day you have to be there with God, demanding what you need. Every. Day.

And with this parable, Jesus is telling his disciples to just say the thing – make your demands of God and be clear about it. The little widow stands before the giant judge and

⁶ Luke 18:4-5, *The Message Version*

⁷ Luke 18:6-8a, *The Message Version*

she says: *I want justice!* There's no *Dear, sweet judge who is ever so kind and generous...if it please you – and I'll understand if you say no – but if it please you, could you please give me just a morsel of justice? If it's not too much?*

No! No, this woman doesn't have time for those kinds of prayers. She grabs hold of the judge and she tells him *exactly* what she needs: *I want justice!* And we should do the same: if we need something from God, ask for it! Ask for it! Don't butter up God with that flowery language filled with outrageous adjectives – just tell God what you need. Yes, we should certainly praise God in our prayers and we should acknowledge God's glory and majesty but when we are in that wrestling match we don't have time for that! In the struggle we must name our need: *I will not let you go, unless you bless me!*

My dear brothers and sisters, when it comes to praying and not losing heart, we're going to have to be as stubborn with God as this little widow is with this powerful judge! We're going to have to march right up to God's throne and look God square in the face and we're going to have to say exactly what we need.

God, I don't understand why you would let this war in Gaza happen. I don't understand why so many good people had to be slaughtered. I don't understand why the land of the Prince of Peace lay in ruins. I am not going to stop asking you these questions – God, I am going to wrestle with you for as long as it takes until you bless me with the answers I need.

God, there's a whole lot of injustice happening here in the United States. Innocent immigrant and migrant men and women and children seeking a life – not even a better life, just a life – these folks are being kidnapped and deported without due process. Families are being shattered and little brains are being forever injured by the trauma endured. And to top it all off, God, to just make it so much uglier, a great number of our neighbors have chosen evil over good, punishment over compassion, hate over love, racism over acceptance. God, I am going to wrestle with you for as long as it takes until you bless me with the answers I need!

God, our country has a gun problem and it seems like it's never a good time to talk about it, but here we are, so let's talk about it. Why are there so many gun deaths in this country? And why do young, white men feel that the answer to their problems is through the barrel of a gun? And why do we feel we even need guns, and why do we feel we need to protect ourselves from one another, and why are we so afraid of one another that we have enough weapons to arm every man, woman,

and child in this country with plenty of guns left over! God, we have little kids dying by gun violence – what are you going to do about it? What are we going to do about it? How do we stop these senseless deaths – God, I will not let you go unless you take care of this tragic violence happening in our streets, in our schools, in our places of worship.

God, we need whatever is happening with our economy to stop doing what it's doing and we need to get it fixed because folks are running out of money, folks are running out of savings, folks are running out of options to exist.

God, we need leaders who care more about the ones they serve than themselves. We need a functioning government. We need our representatives to get back to Washington and fix this budget crisis and figure out a way to curb inflation, and they should stay there until every person in this country has access to truly affordable healthcare.

Things around here are a mess, it's a mess God, but I'm not going to let go – I'm not going to let go! So tell us how to fix this! Show us that you're with us! We can't do this alone...God we can't do this alone – the salvation of this world relies on you. So, let's get to wrestling because I'm not going to let go unless you bless me...unless you bless us...unless you bless all of this!

As the early morning sun creeps onto the shores of the Jabbok river, Jacob – now named Israel – rises from the dust, his life preserved after this wrestling match with the Divine. He is no longer to be known as “the one who cheats”, no longer “Jacob the thief”, but from now on he will be known as *Israel* – “He who struggles with God.” In the end, Jacob gets what he needs – maybe not what he *expects* – but he gets what he *needs*. And with confidence, Israel turns his face toward Edom and walks into the unknown, sure that God will be with him as he journeys to meet his vengeful brother – maybe not what he expects, but what he needs. And Israel walks away from the wrestling match with a limp, a reminder of the struggle with God, but a reminder, too, of his new-found reliance on God. A limp that he may not expect, but one that he needs.

I think it's important that we see what happens to Jacob – the lectionary doesn't include it, but I think it's worthwhile, so, as Paul Harvey would say, “Here's the rest of the story.” Jacob has crossed the river and he meets his family on the other shore.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put

the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him [Israel] and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”

Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand, for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favor. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have everything I want.”⁸

No violence. No bloodshed. The past wasn’t even mentioned! Esau treats Israel like nothing has happened between them. With open arms, Esau welcomes Israel and his entire family to Edom and he extends hospitality to them and he loves them. Definitely not what Israel expected when he came face-to-face with his brother, but it is what he needs.

Jesus tells his disciples, “So what makes you think God won’t step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won’t he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet.”⁹ Jesus Christ – Emmanuel, God with us – tells this to his disciples. He tells this to his disciples! That’s us! Friends, if someone so entrenched in corruption and injustice as this judge; someone who doesn’t fear God nor worries about what others think of him – if someone like *him* can be persuaded by this little widow, how much more so do you think God, who is in *love* with you, imagine how much more God desires to give you what you need.

I hear your minds right now: *That’s all well and good, Sheth, but I don’t need war. I don’t need those kids in Gaza to die. I don’t need our nation’s Congress to continue to use its citizens as*

⁸ Genesis 33:1-11a, *NRSVUE*

⁹ Luke 18:6-8a, *The Message Version*

pawns in their game for wealth. I don't need my mom to get lost in dementia. I don't need my husband to die. I don't need this cancer. I don't need this poverty. I don't need this depression. My friends – I know. I know all about that side of this faith. That side says, "I believe? Now help my unbelief?" That side says, "But God, what about...?" That side says, "God, you're not doing your job. You're not doing what you said you would do. You're not living up to your end of the bargain."

I have these conversations with God all the time as well. And it's healthy to have these questions, and it's healthy to have some doubt, or a lot of doubt, or complete uncertainty, and it's healthy to get fire-poker-hot-angry at God because, yeah, this ain't paradise. That Christian hope of the reign of Christ being now and not yet? Well, it's feeling awfully not yet.

So, brothers and sisters and siblings, I suppose we're going to have to keep wrestling. We're going to have to keep wrestling because if we aren't at peace with it, then we aren't done wrestling with it. If we aren't at peace with it, then we aren't done wrestling with it.

This war between Ukraine and Russia – God, bless me with what I need.

God, Memom is alive but she's not living; she's not her anymore – bless me with what I need.

God, I'm tired of seeing the voting rights of non-white folk being stripped away. I'm tired of women having to go to court to maintain ownership of their own bodies. I'm tired of having to pay so much more for food knowing how much is going to profit. I am tired...

And this thing between me and my brother. And I'm not ready for my husband to die. And I am scared to go out in public. And the kids I am teaching have experienced so much trauma. And I am ashamed to be an American and I am embarrassed to be a Christian and my little faith is awfully little.

Jesus, I need to know that you are going with us because we can't do this alone. We need to know that no matter what will happen, you will be right there with us. We need to see you face-to-face because it is hard to make out the promises you've made; it is difficult to see prosperity. This is our last chance to get what we need...

We are going to have to get into the dust. We're going to have to grapple with our doubts and fears. We're going to have to bring all the questions we have and leave them

with God. And we're going to have to go to God and we're going to have to go *every* day, and we're going to have to make our case. We're going to have to be stubborn. We're going to have to grab God and look into their face, and we're going to have to say: *God – I will not let you go unless you bless me with what I need. I will not let you go unless you bless me with what I need! I will not let you go unless you bless me with what I need!*