

### Proper 24, Year C

- We have to be careful with our Gospel this morning
- We have to be careful with parables in general, I find – be clear about what they are and what they aren't – a parable isn't merely an analogy or an allegory – rather it's a story meant to illustrate a point or help people think about something
- So when we read this parable – the parable of the unjust judge – we do ourselves and our God a disservice if we draw a simple equation, thinking of ourselves as the widow and God as the unjust judge
- When you put it in those terms, it's fairly easy to see why that's a problem – our God is not simply just, but the fount and source of all justice, and not an unjust judge
- But we forget that sometimes when we think about the message this parable intends to teach us
- We think that Jesus is telling us that maybe if we pray hard enough, pray often enough, eventually God will be swayed to our cause – We read this as though maybe by our persistence we can wear God down
- We are not meant to identify ourselves as the widow in the story – our prayers may sometimes remain unanswered in the way we expect, but this is not because we need to keep patiently urging God to do the “right thing” in hopes that eventually God will
- To quote a popular commercial: “That's not how this works – that's not how any of this works”
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- But I'm not here today to preach against persistence, either
- That would be a bit of a fool's errand, I think, given the reading we have from the Old Testament, this foundational story from Genesis
- The story of a new name given, not only to Jacob, but by extension to all of God's chosen people – that name 'Israel'
- To this point, of course, Jacob is only known by the name he was given at birth – the name Jacob, which comes from the word for “heel”, in reference to the fact that he was born holding onto his brother Esau's heel – and in the way in which Hebrew names are always indicative of a deeper truth, also has a more figurative meaning in that he will continue to grab his brother's heel – an idiom referencing the fact that he will supplant his brother, tricking him out of his birthright and his father's blessing
- Jacob is, in other words, a bit of a heel himself – and so the name 'Jacob' comes to mean

something along those lines – ‘usurper’ or ‘cheat’

- So in this story, where Jacob wrestles at the Jabbok with someone who demands to know Jacob’s name, they’re not simply asking what to call him, but asking how he is defined
- And when Jacob is given a new name, it doesn’t just mean he’s got something else on his driver’s license – it’s a change in his entire identity
- In an instant, he goes from being defined as a heel, a crook – to being defined as someone who wrestles with God
- And not just that – but that name, that *identity* of wrestling with God – is given to all of Jacob’s descendants, all of God’s chosen people
- Jacob is rewarded for his persistence – and we are meant to claim that identity, that same persistence – to struggle and endure, maybe not literally like Jacob did, but at the very least to do so figuratively – to wrestle, even with God
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- So while we shouldn’t think of ourselves as the righteous widow, because our prayers, however well-intentioned, are not slowly wearing God down to the cause of justice – we also have to be willing to follow Jacob’s example in struggling and striving and wrestling with God
- That’s something that we can lose sight of, especially those of us with experience in other religious traditions that teach, intentionally or unintentionally, that it is not for us to question God – traditions that equate any type of questioning with a lack of faith
- As though our God were interested in all of human experience as long as it wasn’t seeking deeper answers; wasn’t willing to ask probing questions
- As though the only way to properly worship God were to be untroubled by any occurrence, including seeming injustice, as though any terrible things we saw taking were simply God’s plan, and never sin or evil
- As though asking God that most basic of questions – “Why?” – were a betrayal of our faith
- As though we worshiped a God who was threatened by Jacob’s struggling
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- Struggling with those questions, wrestling with God, isn’t abandoning our faith
- It’s something even the Psalm today, one of my favorite texts, one of my favorite **prayers**, in all of Scripture, is comfortable doing, comfortable even leading with
- “I lift my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?”
- At first, this starts as a very different prayer

- A prayer of anguish, of uncertainty, possibly even of lament
- A prayer that doesn't know where to even find help
- A prayer fitting for some of the moments we've all had to live through – moments of crisis in our lives or the lives of loved ones
- Moments of grief in the face of loss
- Moments of anguish at injustice in the world
- Moments where we too might feel like screaming at the sky, "From where is our help to come?"
- Scripture leaves room for those questions – God gives us room for those questions, and even invites us to persist in asking them
- But both Scripture and our God eventually give us our answers, too:
- Our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.