

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

---

We all come from families that have some degree of dysfunction, but we can learn from our struggles.

Look at the life of Jacob. Family hostilities characterized his entire life. Because Isaac and Rebekkah played favorites, he and his twin brother Esau grew up hating each other. Jacob also swindled Esau out of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance.

Later, he and Rebekkah lied and connived to swindle the family blessing from his blind and dying father. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran.

Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob fled Laban, only to encounter his long lost and embittered brother Esau. The skillful deal-maker, Jacob concocted a bribe and sent a caravan of gifts along with his women and children across the river Jabbok in hopes that it would pacify his brother's murderous threats.

And this is where we pick up today's first reading: "That same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the river Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream,

and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

So in our reading today, we find Jacob physically exhausted and deeply anxious about Esau. He is alone in the desert wilderness and without his many worldly possessions. Powerless to control his fate, Jacob collapsed into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River. With Laban behind him and Esau before him, he was too exhausted to struggle any longer.

And only then did his real struggle begin. Fleeing his family history had been bad enough; wrestling with God Himself was a different matter. During that long, lonesome night an angelic stranger visited Jacob and they wrestled throughout the night.

The angel then does something unexpected: he wounds Jacob on the hip so that he limps for the rest of his life.

Author and pastor, Richard Rohr states: “Wrestling with God, with life, and with ourselves is necessary. The blessing usually comes in a wounding of some sort and for most of us it is an entire life of limping along to finally see the true and real blessing of our life.” We tend to see our woundedness, our challenges, our problems as a defeat. Yet our persistence through them can bless us, and in some mysterious way we can, like Jacob, encounter God in the struggle. This is the central message from our Genesis reading today.

After his struggle Jacob said, "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared". As a result, Jacob received a new name, Israel, which means "He struggles with God."

In our culture and many churches too, the myths of Superwoman and Superman live large. We celebrate wealth, power, strength, bluster, confidence, prestige and victory, beginning with Little League baseball for our kids and continuing throughout their lives.

We detest weakness, failure, struggle, and doubt. Even though we know that vulnerability and discouragement accompany most normal lives, yet we look at them as signs of failure or even a lack of faith. In real life, naive optimism is a recipe for disappointment. Sooner or later reality catches up with us.

The Jacob story jerks us back into reality. Catholic nun and writer Joan Chittister uses the Jacob story as an example of a "spirituality of struggle." In Jacob's story she identifies eight elements of our human struggle, they are part of life, but we run them: change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and woundedness.

But God does not leave us there, says Chittister, and in each human struggle there is a corresponding divine gift available to us. Facing our struggles we find: conversion, independence, faith, courage, surrender, endurance, and transformation.

Jacob does what we all must do if we want to become whole and mature people. He confronts himself and does not blame others for his problems. He honestly faces the things that are wounding him. Only then is he able to move on with God's blessing.

In the end, along the Jabbok river, after all his struggle, God blessed Jacob.

When you read further in Jacob's story, the twin themes of dark struggles accompanied by divine blessing continue to be intertwined.

His daughter Dinah was raped. Two of his sons, Reuben and Judah, committed incest. As if to mimic his own parents who favored him over his twin brother Esau, Jacob played favorites with his own son Joseph, sewing seeds of fraternal hostility. And yet, because of his brokenness and willingness to look into his own soul and learn from his failures, God renewed the covenant with him.

Human struggle is never easy, and certainly not a struggle with God Himself. But, for the humble who are willing to learn from their mistakes, the struggle is never void of divine presence and blessing.

Jacob's struggle along the river reminds us of the truth, that God is good, but God is not safe. We may well struggle with Him throughout the night, but by daybreak He only intends to bless us.