

Pentecost 21
October 21, 2007
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

Sibling rivalry, that is what it was. Esau was a bossy first born, always trying to win favor with his parents and acting conscientious. Jacob was a mama's boy who learned to be cunning and crafty in order to get what he wanted. These two brothers were locked in a struggle from the beginning.

Esau slipped out of his mother's womb first but Jacob was right on his heels. In fact, he was holding on to his brother's heel and thus the name Jacob or "heel grabber."

Esau was a man's man. He went hunting with his father. He engaged in sports and did not mind getting dirty. Jacob, on the other hand, hung around the kitchen tent. He was not interested in hunting and was always neat and clean. Esau, who tended to be driven by his stomach, was almost always hungry. For a pot of stew, Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright as the first born son. When Isaac was old and nearly blind, Jacob tricked his father and stole Esau's blessing.

Things must have heated up between the two brothers because Jacob left town. He went to live with his uncle Laban where he fared pretty well for himself. Finally, he left Laban under a cloud with more sheep and cattle than he should have and stolen goods hidden under his wife's saddle. Jacob now found himself between the wrath of Laban and the wrath of Esau. Jacob decides it is best to seek reconciliation with his brother. So, he sends messengers ahead to state his intentions.

Esau responded that he would meet Jacob but he was going to be accompanied by 400 men. Well, Jacob decided that he was not going to fall into that trap. He divided his flocks and herds in half so half would survive if Esau was to overwhelm him. Just as a further precaution, Jacob sent his wives, children and possessions across the river.

As night fell Jacob tried to get some rest. We would probably say Jacob had a whale of a bad dream. Jacob tossed and turned struggling with Esau, with Laban and with some supernatural being. Jacob could not win but he was not about to give up. He struggled through a night that seemed longer than the fourteen years he worked for Laban in order to take Rachael as his wife.

He sweated and he swore. He cried out in frustration but he could not outmatch his opponent.

Finally the stranger did to Jacob what Jacob had done to Esau and Laban, he cheated. He struck Jacob in the hip a mighty blow dislocating his hip. Jacob cried out in pain but he did not let go.

"Let me go," the stranger said, "day is breaking." Jacob finally thought he had the advantage and he was not one to let an advantage slip by.

"I will not unless you bless me," he replied.

"What is your name?"

"Jacob."

"No longer is it Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Wait just a minute. Jacob began to get a terrible feeling. If the stranger was saying he had struggled with Esau and Laban and he had struggled with God, this was not Esau or Laban so by process of elimination....

"Tell me your name," Jacob said.

"No matter," said the stranger as he disappeared. Jacob awoke knowing he had wrestled with God. He named the place *Peniel* which means "presence" because he had endured the presence of God and prevailed.

Jacob's blessing and the new name testify to the fact that because of his persistence Jacob was changed and now ready to assume a position as one through whom the divine presence could be known.

Most of us like the story of Jacob. We identify with this man and his struggles. There are times when all of us have struggled with family, friends and even struggled with God. If Jacob can struggle with God and be blessed perhaps there is hope for us as well.

The reading from Paul's letter to Timothy contains additional words that exhort us to persist. Paul writes, "Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed knowing from whom you learned it..... All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and

for training in righteousness." Paul reminds us that we can persevere in faithful living because of what we have learned and believe.

One of the identified struggles facing the church today is relevance. In an age when people are questioning and searching, how can we tell the Biblical story in relevant ways that speak to where you and I live our lives every day? Paul reminds Timothy and us we have the story of God who created and who remains our present help throughout our lives even in times of struggle and trouble. Trusting in that which we have learned, known and believed we can be relevant witnesses to the power of God in the world.

Jesus tackles the urging to be persistent in a different way. Jesus told his followers that they were to pray always and not lose heart. To illustrate this Jesus tells a parable that we label the parable of the unjust judge.

The characters in this story are vivid contrasts of one another. The one is a judge, a man of high esteem and importance in the community. He is in a position of authority. He exercises his authority without fear of God and without concern for what others might think.

On the other hand is a poor widow. She is one of the most vulnerable people in the society of her day. The Law makes no provision for care of widows. So, without a husband or family upon whom she can rely, the widow's survival is in question.

Jesus does not give us any of the details but we know this widow has been wronged. She has come to the judge seeking justice. The judge has simply dismissed her. Every day as he leaves the courtroom, there is the widow asking for just a moment of his time. As he mounts his donkey to go home, there is the woman outside the courthouse with her signs. The widow does not seek retribution against her adversary, rather is she asking for what is rightly hers.

Finally the judge relents because of the widow's constant harassment. He does not want the widow to give him, in the Greek, a black eye. So, the judge acts out of self interest and not because of a change of heart. The judge did not want his authority as a judge to be undermined by the repeated intrusions of this widow.

Jesus goes on to say, "If this unjust judge will finally grant justice, how much more will the God of mercy come to the aid of those who seek Divine help?"

Jesus taught his followers to pray often and not lose heart. Yet prayer is not about manipulating God or giving God orders. Prayer is not even a religious duty. Jesus

tells his followers, prayer is a necessity, a hunger, a deep need. Prayer is necessary for faith. Prayer is necessary in order to have a relationship with God. Prayer is essential to deepening one's encounter with the Divine. Without prayer, faith dries up. Prayer is about committing ourselves to maker of heaven and earth from whom our help is to come. Jesus invites us to be persistent in prayer even in times of struggle the God of mercy is our very present help.