

While in London, Phil and I went to the Churchill War Rooms, the converted underground storage rooms that served as the top-secret military strategic headquarters for England during WW II. It was fascinating to step back into time in this way, as the rooms were virtually shut up and forgotten for decades immediately after the war ended, and you really feel as if you're in a time capsule as you tour them. We learned a lot about Winston Churchill in the process, certainly one of the giants of the last century with tremendous strengths, as well as some impressive peculiarities and weaknesses. But what I walked away from the tour with was a sense of Churchill's ability to lead and inspire the people of England during a war in which it seemed for a time that they alone were standing against the combined military might of Germany, Italy, and Japan; seriously outmatched and almost certainly doomed to fail, prior to our entering the fray. With nightly bombings terrorizing London and horrendous casualties at the war fronts, Churchill's bulldog tenacity came to symbolize for that entire nation, and possibly much of the free world, the refusal to yield. He is credited with saying, "Never, never, never give up". And he didn't, and they didn't, and the course of history is what it is, because of that persistence and tenacity.

That same sense of refusing to give up in the face of overwhelming odds is present in both of our lessons this morning. And although it isn't evident at first glance, *both* of these lessons are built around an athletic metaphor, a sports match. An athletic competition between two very unevenly matched opponents. That's fairly obvious in the first lesson from Genesis, where Jacob is described as being in a wrestling match against

a mysterious opponent with supernatural powers. That Jacob, that combination of scoundrel and patriarch, should prevail, was highly unlikely. That's easy to see at first glance. But the Gospel lesson is *also* built around a sports metaphor, one which we often overlook because of translation issues. When the unjust judge decides that he will grant the widow's petition, so that she not wear him out with her continual coming, the literal translation would actually be, "I will grant her justice so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye", and the verb used is one associated with boxing matches. So, we have a wrestling match in the first lesson, and a boxing match in the second, and in both cases, the eventual winner is hopelessly outmatched by their opponent. In this fall season, when many of us are sports minded, this may be a very appropriate set of lessons. High school and college sports have begun. At the professional level, the Twins had a good year, the Vikings may have a good year, and at a national level, Simone Biles is doing amazing things in gymnastics for the USA, and many of us are tuned in, one way or another, to sports right now. In that spirit, let's investigate these two athletic matches more closely.

Both athletic contests include an unsavory character. In the Old Testament, the shady character is ironically the hero, Jacob. Appropriately, his name, in Hebrew, means, "I cheat." Having earlier on cheated away his older brother, Esau's, birthright and blessing, in the two decades that follow in the land to which he escapes, through deception and trickery, Jacob has made a success of things. How unfair is that? He has wives, children, hired men and servants, cattle, land, riches, and so on. It would seem that the blessing he wrongly received most certainly proved to be powerful and true. But as

we meet him today, he is on his way back to his home, back to see brother Esau, whom he has not seen in many, many years and who, we would expect, may not wish him well. Having grown some older and wiser, Jacob wishes to settle back down in his homeland, and so he travels with all that he has, people and possessions. But, Jacob is fearful; Jacob knows he is guilty of wronging his brother. So, he sends some lovely gifts on ahead of his party to try and soften up Esau in advance, and then he sends off his wives, children, men, cattle and so forth, so that he alone will encounter Esau. The very fact that he is returning to make amends, that he knows he was in the wrong, and that he seeks to protect those he loves, tells us that this scoundrel, Jacob, has done some growing up in the last two decades also. He's not the same man he was, and he is struggling to right some wrongs. We might wonder what kind of solitary night he will have, prior to this momentous meeting with his wronged brother, and our lesson gives the answer. He spends the night wrestling with a stranger. Theologian Soren Kierkegaard popularized the phrase "the dark night of the soul". Jacob is certainly having that kind of night, the kind you lie awake and agonize and pray and wrestle, and in this case, the metaphor appears to be actually happening. The wrestling stranger is later identified as an angel, as a representative of the very God. Jacob wrestles through the night with God, in the person of this mysterious angelic stranger. Although outmatched, Jacob will not give up; he will not let go until he receives a blessing, and yet how can he prevail against God--- unless God allows it? But even with God's forbearance, it's no easy match. The angel is quite the wrestler, also, and no blessing will be given until Jacob reveals his name--- which means that Jacob, in essence, makes confession, because he admits to the angel, "I

am called, “Jacob”....the same as admitting, “I am called-the one who cheats.” He makes his confession, he comes face to face with who he really is before God. *Then* he is renamed and blessed. His new name, “Israel” means “one who wrestles with God”. And Jacob/Israel leaves that place the next morning with a new identity, a blessing, and a limp—because one does not emerge from a wrestling match with God unscathed or unchanged. Nevertheless, Jacob probably feels that his persistence has paid off; he received the blessing he desired. Because he wouldn’t give up.

The sports match in our Gospel lesson also introduces us to an unsavory character, in this instance, a judge who cares nothing for God or humanity or justice. This is a story that can initially seem confusing. Is Jesus telling us that God is an unjust judge who only responds to us if we wear God down through sheer persistence? It might seem so, but we need to recognize, as we have before, that not all parables are complete and absolute allegories. In an allegory, each element of the story represents someone or something in life. So, for example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, it’s clear that the forgiving father represents God, and the prodigal son and the older son represent us. But this parable is *not* an allegory. It’s an example of another type of teaching, where one argues from the lesser to the greater. Jesus uses this type of teaching when he says things like, “If even *you* give bread to your hungry children, how much more will God provide for all in *God’s* care.” In this parable, Jesus uses the illustration of a bad judge who cares nothing for God nor anyone else. A widow, living in the city of this unjust judge, continually comes before him to plead for justice in her cause. Widows in ancient Palestine were at the bottom rung of the ladder and had no rights or standing; this widow

is hopelessly outmatched. Particularly, since this judge doesn't care about justice and he doesn't care about the widow. But, she won't give up. In the metaphor of the boxing match, she keeps on getting up when hit, and she keeps on throwing punches of her own. Picture one of the widows you know, perhaps someone here this morning, outfitted in boxing gloves and going after a much more powerful opponent, and you will get the picture this parable presents in your mind. (If you think of Audrey in boxing gloves taking on Tim Anderson, for example, you realize there may actually be a hint of dark humor in Jesus' telling of this story). Finally the unjust judge decides to grant her justice to simply get rid of her. He fears one her punches will blacken his eye, and it's not worth the risk anymore. Jesus' point is another lesser to greater teaching: if *even* an unjust judge responds to persistence, how much *more* will a loving God respond to his people who display that same kind of persistence, that same "never give up" attitude?

The common factor, then, in the Jacob story and the Judge and Widow story, is the feisty persistence of the one of wrestles or boxes, their refusal to give up and go away. Luke introduces the widow story by telling us that Jesus intended the parable to remind us to pray always and not lose heart. All of this is well and good; it's fine to read about wrestling with God or praying persistently without losing heart. It's the *living out* of these things that's so much harder to do. How do we relate to Jacob and the widow and their persistence?

I would think that each of us here this morning has had our share of wrestling matches with God, like Jacob. These would be the times when we face circumstances or events that we do not understand and cannot accept and we struggle with God to find

some shred of meaning, some ray of hope, some signpost of direction. In most ways, Jacob is a poor role model, being one who cheated his way to success. But in this one instance, we see something good and strong in Jacob, namely, that he won't give up. He won't stop wrestling. He doesn't just quit, walk away from the match, and let the angel win. He remains engaged with God in his wrestling; which essentially means that he keeps the faith. It's easy to keep faith when things go as we like; it's much harder to do so when everything is falling apart around us or within us. How *tempting* it is to simply throw in the towel in such a situation and say---"there is no God, I'll have nothing more to do with this faith thing, I'll not waste another *moment* trying to understand." How *much harder* it is to keep wrestling, keep struggling, keep thinking, keep praying, keep worshipping, keep talking with friends, keep the faith. But that is the model that God holds up for us to follow. And although Jacob walks away from his wrestling match with a limp---and we, too, carry scars from our times of wrestling---he also walks away with a blessing. If we have struggled with God, our circumstances, our selves, our pasts, to try and make sense of things, we understand Jacob and the need to not give up.

How can we relate to the widow? The widow in the Gospel lesson is also blest for her feisty persistence in the boxing ring. Simply by not giving up, by not going away, she wears down the resistance of that unjust judge. In the end, she receives her desired justice. Persistence pays off. Not giving up matters. This parable, I think, paints a somewhat unpleasantly realistic view of the world. It acknowledges that the world is unjust and that people tend to act out of impure and self-serving motives, like this unjust judge. Look around and you'll have to admit, that is the world in which we live. So the

question becomes, given this sometimes grim reality, what should we, as people of faith, do about it? And the answer is: don't give up. Don't lose heart. Keep praying. And we learn something about the power of persistent prayer in this parable; we learn that prayer doesn't make us passive or helpless, it actually energizes us to action and dogged persistence. The widow's prayers don't mean she just stays home quietly and hopes things change; her prayers keep pushing her back into the boxing ring to throw a few more punches. Even when we feel outmatched, that the odds are stacked against us, and that the world neither notices nor cares, we are urged here to persist in prayer, to remain engaged in our relationship with God and to keep on boxing, rather than to give up. In fact, in times of doubt and struggle, sometimes the only way we may find to remain faithful *is* to persist and wrestle and box. Even if our faith is being expressed through anger, doubt, struggle and questioning, those are our acts of faith at that time. Whether we are engaging God by shaking our fist at heaven or by getting down on our knees, either way we *are* engaging God. We are staying in the relationship. We are keeping the faith. We don't give up.

This morning, then, let's ask ourselves if we have been engaging in any kind of spiritual sporting matches lately. Have we been Jacob, wrestling through the night with God, having to face hard truths about ourselves, our past, or our present? Have we been the boxing widow, refusing to take no for an answer, persisting in prayer and action in the face of apparent indifference or injustice on the part of the world? I'm guessing that, like it or not, we *have* all been Jacob and the widow. The reality of our selves and our world puts us in those positions, and it's tough. It can be hard to wrestle or box or persistently

pray and act, simply because we grow weary and discouraged and would rather give up. How much more challenging it is keep on keeping on, period. And yet that is the model of faith that Jacob the wrestler, and the boxing widow hold up for us this morning.

Persist in prayer. Do not lose heart. Keep on wrestling and boxing. Keep the faith, by keeping those very practices. Never give up. Because in our persistence and stubbornness in encountering God and opposing injustice, we will experience blessing.

Amen.