

WRESTLING FAITH

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Genesis 32: 22-31 - Jacob wrestles through the night

Luke 18: 2-5 - Parable of the widow and the judge

One of the disadvantages of not writing a sermon is that the topic won't sit still. It just keeps growing, and sometimes I stand up here and just don't know where to start!

Our focus today is on the parable of the widow and the judge, and the story from Genesis of Jacob wrestling with the man, the angel, through the night. There are many different layers of interpretation throughout the history of the scriptures themselves and of Christianity. Much of the interpretation of this parable of the widow and the judge throughout the history of the church has been determined by that part of the story that I did not have Joy-Anne [Murphy] read--a bit of a preamble and a bit following the reading where Luke gives an interpretation of the parable. Luke's introductory statement is something about how important it is to pray all the time. So we have this picture of the widow coming to the unjust judge to claim her due, and she persists long enough that he is persuaded--or not exactly persuaded, just worn down. And then the parable goes on with some more words of Jesus that give an interpretation, the persistence in prayer and so on.

Over the last century or so there has been a tremendous amount of scholarship in the study of the New Testament--indeed, of the whole Bible--because of material and versions and so on that we have now but weren't available hundreds of years ago. Once in a while people get together in a study group and look at some of the insights of modern scholarship relating to the Bible. These insights are so revealing, and enable a new depth and fresh view of scripture. And sometimes people come back to their ministers and say "Did you know this?" And the minister says "Oh, yes, we learned that back in seminary." And they say "Why didn't you tell us!" The reason we don't is that it is scholarship, it's academic, it's all hypothetical, and it pulls everything apart and leaves people wondering what's left of our Bible. And that's really where it was at when I came out of seminary.

Since then, some amazing turns have occurred. There are scholars who have begun saying "We have to put this back together; we've got to bottom-line it even though as good scholars we consider everything hypothetical. Nothing is ever final, but let's bottom-line it so that we can at least offer some conclusions that people can understand." One of the groups that has done this is the organization called the Westar Institute, and they have done it with what they call the Jesus Institute or the Jesus Seminar. They gathered some of the best biblical scholars; hundreds of them came together to look at the gospels and to ask how close they could get to understanding what Jesus was really about.

We know there are layers and layers of development of the gospels, and people have added things that we know Jesus didn't say. It's not that people making the additions were lying; it's just that that's the way people wrote in those days. We know that the prophet Isaiah, for example, said some amazing things, and people who became his followers kept writing his stuff down--everything he said, every new thing he said, for about two hundred years. Well, you know he didn't live for two hundred years, but that was how they wrote the book of Isaiah. And they did the same thing in the New Testament. For example, Luke adds words that are his interpretation, but written as if they were Jesus' words. So the Jesus Seminar got everybody together and said "Let's just vote on every bit of what Jesus said. How many of us are really sure Jesus really said that? How many are certain that there's no way Jesus said that; rather, that it was Luke adding his interpretation. And who among us are uncertain, are in some shade of grey between those extremes?"

The part that I asked Joy-Anne to read is that which scholars are pretty clear Jesus said. And scholars are pretty sure that the introduction to that reading, as well as the portion following it, were Luke's additions. Now, being Luke's additions doesn't invalidate them. We are not dismissing parts of the Bible; rather, we are merely understanding the Bible properly. This part, on the one hand, is what Jesus said; that part, on the other hand, is how Luke interpreted it. Luke's interpretation was often closely related to the historical context. Remember, he was writing in the context of severe persecution. He was trying to encourage people to persist and keep going, and so he used this story to say it is about praying and being trusting and persisting.

But when we look at the parable by itself, there's something quite different in what Jesus was saying. The problem with the prayer interpretation is that we end up trying to picture ourselves as this widow persisting with God and asking for what we need. But then, God is portrayed as a corrupt judge. That doesn't work for me. And so we take a look at what Jesus was really doing. Another stream of thought in contemporary scholarship is looking at Jesus' words and saying Jesus was much more about the inner life of faith, the inner journey. In the third century when attempts were made to standardize the faith into the orthodoxy that we practice today, much of that was lost. The reason is that people were trying to bring everyone together into a conformist standardized kind of faith, whereas this inner journey method that Jesus was offering led people into a much broader diversity of our faith.

So we look at this passage and compare it, as does the lectionary, with the story of Jacob wrestling with this man through the night. We interpret that not as some physical man, because usually we don't think that someone came upon Jacob in the night. We take the story as the reflection of an inner experience--maybe a dreamlike experience. Jacob encountered the sacred presence and there was a wrestling. It's not the simple sort of sentimental God who comes and holds us gently and then we are fine. Throughout the Old Testament there is a sense that the spiritual life, this engaging soul-work, this engaging of the sacred, has a tension to it. And so it is a wrestling kind of faith, and out of that comes both a wound and a blessing for Jacob. Jesus was rooted in that tradition, and it's the tradition out of which he was teaching.

What if we take a look at the parable of the judge and the widow from that point of view--as something Jesus told by itself without the Lukan interpretation attached? What

could that mean for us in relation to our inner life, our inner spiritual journey, perhaps even as something that was a dream? Maybe Jesus was one of those people who had such an open channel in the depth of his soul that these images came in this bizarre language of dream which is the language of spirituality. It's a language that has a mystery because it doesn't come out with a simple statement that says here is the problem and here is the answer. It has such a depth of mystery about spiritual life. And so what Jesus offered was perhaps just another dream or image or vision. It's like a widow who comes to a corrupt judge with a just case, but he shuts her out. However, she persists and finally she wears him down and he gives in. What could that possibly reflect in our souls?

Well, I must now confess that as we move into this kind of interpretation I find myself asking how to preach it. Maybe this isn't something to preach. I want to take you all down to the lounge on Wednesday evening and have a study group, a meditation group, and lead you through the process of reflecting on this and having you actually do that inner work yourself. I wonder what I am supposed to do standing up here preaching something like this. Well, I just share what comes to my mind for me so that your imagination can be stimulated to think what it could possibly mean for you. What comes to mind for me is really aided by Jungian psychology.

Jung talked about the archetypes, the sort of universal symbols. The widow is a universal symbol. What's the essence of widowhood? Well, you need to look at the essence of marriage. Marriage is a common symbol in the Bible for salvation, for the day of Yahweh, for this time of fulfillment and wholeness like the wedding at Cana. What is it to have lost the husband? It's to have had a moment in our lives when there was that vision of wholeness, that sense of sacred presence, that sense of the beauty and the peace of life--like a woman having been married and then to have lost her husband.

Every one of us, I think, has an experience like that. We have moments early in our lives when we catch a vision of beauty, when we feel God, when we have a sense of "Yes, that's life, and I have it!" We catch a vision of whatever we want to call it, that vision of the beauty and the wholeness of life. We then somehow lose that vision in any of ten thousand different ways, and at that point we come to our widowhood, our spiritual widowhood. That part of us knows it deserves something; it deserves something and wants it. But whenever in our lives we lose something essential there's pain, there's shame, there's whatever goes with it.

And there's another part of our selves that is afraid to want that "something essential" again because we're afraid to face the pain. So we go on in life compensating. It becomes that judge part of us that says "Oh, that would be nice, but that was just something in childhood. You should never hope to have that again. You just have to get on with life and do what needs to be done." And so it's the side of us that hardens the heart as a way of protecting us from the pain; that says it's too dangerous to let that child, to let passion, to let that longing, really be there. We've got to just shut that away and suppress it in order to get on with making life work. That part of us, that widowed part of us, can just give up. We suppress one side of ourselves and the rest dominates.

As Carl Jung said, the essence of our work for salvation, for redemption, is to bring to consciousness all that we have suppressed, and to wrestle out the inner conflicts

because that's the only way to inner peace. And isn't that our picture of salvation? A blessing, inner peace? It's where the inner parts of our selves fight with one another, and maybe one side gives up and we think we're at peace. But we're not; we're just stable until we have our nervous breakdown.

One of the most profound books I've ever read on spiritual life is entitled *Soul Making* by Alan Jones and subtitled, *The Desert Way of Spirituality*. At one point he says--and he's talking in a sort of Jungian psychotherapy sort of way--

Somehow all the repressed material must come to light. Psychoanalysis is one of the ways in which that which is repressed comes to the surface and is integrated into a more honest and open life. I would claim that another way of integration is that of contemplative prayer.¹

Contemplative prayer is the spiritual practice that is inward-oriented, that listens deeply into the soul and allows what is suppressed, what is there in the depths, to rise to the surface. The reason is that this is how the spiritual energy comes to us from the depth of our being, from our soul, and offers us the opportunities to do the wrestling that we need to do to work towards the wholeness that is our salvation, that is our redemption, that is our inner peace.

There is another side of Christianity, the hard-hearted fundamentalist side, which is moralistic in its approach to life. It teaches that contemplative prayer is an agent of the devil that has a deep fear of the inner power of the depth of our souls. There has been tension between these two sides of Christianity throughout the entire history of Christianity.

We're now living in a time when the suppressed side of Christian life, of the Christian tradition, is surfacing. As a result, much of the turmoil in our theology, in our evolution of spiritual life, results from taking another look at that deep inner side of spiritual life that stands in tension with the external, moralistic, controlling, judgemental side of Christian spirituality.

The story of Jacob gives us a picture of the promise, the gospel, the good news. But it's also a picture similar to widowhood. It is the story of someone having lost the gem. It's having left home, having broken the relationship with his brother, and having run away. It is also the story about him eventually returning home and reconciling. That's a deep universal image. The turning point occurs at night when Jacob wrestles within himself with the sacred that has come to him. And from that wrestling Jacob is wounded, but he is also blessed and set free to turn toward home and to face (with the deepest fear) his brother. We have that wonderful story of the meeting and the reconciliation. That is not just an historical little anecdote; rather, it is a profound story full of universal images and metaphors of the inner path of spiritual life for all of us.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor

¹ Alan Jones, *Soul Making*, "The desert way of spirituality" (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) pp. 38-9.