

Lectionary 29C/Confirmation — October 20, 2019

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Who knew that prayer was a contact sport? Nick, one of our confirmands, is a lacrosse player. Lacrosse, if you don't know it, is a contact sport — with sticks! Maybe lacrosse would be a good metaphor for prayer, but wrestling is the chosen metaphor of our first reading.

Jacob wrestles with an unknown opponent through the night, holding his own. It's not until almost daybreak when the unknown opponent resorts to sort of a dirty trick and punches Jacob on the hip and puts it out of joint. The match ends in a stalemate, and Jacob scratches his head, wondering if the one with whom he had contended through the night might have been God. "Have I just seen God face to face?" he asks as he limps off to find his morning coffee.

Sort of a powerful metaphor, huh? The life of faith, apparently, is not all sunshine and giggles. Sometimes it's more like an intense wrestling match waged in the dark of night, as we hurl our questions and doubts at God. And we may not receive a blessing until the struggle has worn on for a bit.

As we have tried to emphasize repeatedly in confirmation, faith is not knowing all the right answers or being free of doubt. Rather, faith is a willingness to stay in the match and to keep on wrestling, til dawn if need be. And sometimes clarity and insight does come with the light of a new day.

Tenacity might be another word to describe what we're talking about. It's a word that our confirmands know, even if it's not part of their daily conversation, because they need to have it in order to be good at the things at which they excel: sports (Nick), music (Joey), debate (Lily), academics (all of you), and lots of other things. Practicing your technique, doing research, attending practices and rehearsals, doing your homework, studying for exams, and sticking to it even on days when you don't particularly feel like it is imperative. All of us know about the importance of tenacity—of sticking with it—in our life and work, but do we ever talk about tenacity as an essential aspect of faith?

Psalm 121 promises "my help comes from the Lord," and that the Lord "will not let your foot be moved." I hear tenacity in that image: hanging on in the midst of the storm. Holding on while the winds buffet and howl. Hanging on for dear life and the waves pitch and roll. Or maybe the image is more like rock climbing. Whatever the rock is that is an obstacle for faith, you are about

half way up the sheer rock face, and you find that somehow you have a toe hold. The Lord “will not let your foot be moved.” You find that you have been given what you need to persist. The climb hasn’t gotten any easier, but you have been given the grace of tenacity that enables you to hang on and in time will enable you to continue climbing that big rock, navigating that obstacle.

From reading their faith statements, I know that these confirmands are well aware that having faith and living out of faith can be difficult at times. Can I really not be afraid when I face challenging times because of the promise of God’s mercy and grace? Can I trust that God will continue to love and care for me even when things are not going well in my life? How can I wrap my head around the fact that no matter how good a person you are, bad things are going to happen sometimes? How can I love those who are difficult to love, or be kind to those who are not kind in return? Why is it so hard to be forgiving?

There once was a young leader of a church named Timothy who was struggling to live in faith and to lead his people in faithful living. We don’t know exactly what obstacles were in front of that community, but we do know that Timothy was very discouraged and worried about their future.

Then he received a letter of encouragement from an older and wiser leader in the church (possibly Paul, but we don’t really know). What guidance does this older, wiser mentor offer the struggling Timothy? To remember what he has learned from the sacred writings that he has known since childhood and to trust that they can offer him guidance in face of the present obstacles in his path.

It seems like we could do a lot worse than to take this simple advice to heart: when in doubt, remember what you learned in Sunday School. God loves you. God loves everybody. God loves the whole creation. Jesus will never leave or forsake you.

And when you need to be reassured of all that—which for most of us is often—come and connect with the community that exists to continually tell that story, the community where we are always reminding one another that God loves us, that God loves the whole world, and that Jesus will never leave us. When in doubt, do church. Paul, or whoever is writing to Timothy, says that this is how we become proficient in faith and equipped for good works. In doing church together, we encourage one another to trust what God promises, we learn how to forgive and how to love and serve others, and through the Holy Spirit we receive the power to do it, even when it becomes difficult.

And there will be days when it is difficult, when having faith and living in faith requires persistence, tenacity. Jesus told us there would be days like this.

That is the basic meaning of the parable he tells us today. There will be days when faith feels like the widow, who needs to keep on arguing her case in front of a no-good judge who is determined not to listen to her. It feels like we're not getting anywhere. The road blocks are too great. Jesus says this is a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart—in other words, about hanging in there and not giving up when we face obstacles to faith.

Jesus knew that sometimes the answer to prayer is silence because he experienced it himself. “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” But silence does not mean that God is not listening, or is not present, or is not willing to help. We don’t really know what the silence means, we just know that it happens sometimes. Jesus said that there would be days like this. And he promised to stay with us — to stand by us in the silence. “I am with you always,” the Risen Christ promises.

And “always” means always. Know this. Take it to heart. Whatever obstacle to faith you may face, Jesus is with you. In the darkness. In the struggle. In the silence. He is with you, and he will not let your foot be moved. And with that toe hold, comes the grace to go on.

Notes

Mary Hinkle Shore, <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Preaching/Index/2019-10-20/2025#sermon>