

“Holy Chutzpah”

I would like to begin the sermon this morning with a prayer from Homer Simpson, “Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me. As an offering I present these milk and cookies. If you wish me to eat them instead, please give me no sign whatsoever... thy will be done. Amen!”

Our lessons this morning are full and ripe with themes for our prayer life. If we allow them to do so, they also pull us deeper into life so that we can more fully experience the incredible presence of God who is always waiting for us. In faith we become more open to God so that we can be filled with divine mercy, grace, love, peace and justice.

It is helpful to hear the two stories a second time this morning. The main characters become companions with us taking us by the hand and walking us to places in our lives where God is waiting to make us whole. As a boy Jacob must have been a lot like Homer Simpson.

Jacob was a scoundrel. He was his mother’s favorite, a stay at home around the tent kind of boy. His older brother Esau had grown up to be a “man’s man, a hunter and outdoors man. After cheating Esau out of his rightful inheritance, Jacob fled for his life and moved in with his uncle, Laban. There, he gained a family fortune. After many years Jacob decided to go home and reconcile with his brother. It is not that unusual for us to have old, old family issues that we want in our heart of hearts to be resolved. At some point we may take the risk of “going home” for just that purpose.

So Jacob packed up his whole clan and all of his belongings and started the long trip home. He sent a messenger ahead with a lot of gifts to announce his good intentions to Esau. Esau sent a message back saying he would meet Jacob with 400 men. Esau had become very wealthy and powerful. There may have been a few issues of trust. Jacob divided his people and belongings the day before he met with Esau to keep them safe and to offer them a route of escape in case the encounter went bad.

That night Jacob, alone at Jabbok creek, poured out his heart in fearful prayer for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, begging God to deliver him from his brother and to also keep the divine promise of birthright and future prosperity.

At this point it is helpful to bring in the Jewish understanding of “chutzpah” that has evolved in its meaning. It is very much a part of both of our stories this morning. Originally the word meant “insolence or audacity”. It originally had overwhelming negative connotations. In defining the word the story was told of a man who murdered his parents and then begged the judge to take pity on him because he was an orphan.”

We wonder how Jacob could have the audacity to ask God to make the birthright that he had stolen from his brother permanent. Jacob wrestled with God all night and held his own. God gave Jacob the freedom to give it his all and even allowed Jacob to demand a blessing from God. God did bless Jacob and gave him much more than he had ever bargained for. Now blessed Jacob limped into the future, wounded yet knowing God as the source of his identity and mission. He is no longer the deceitful schemer who lives with razor-sharp wits, he is now one who struggles with God and finds there is divine blessing and purpose that will direct him and bless him and carry him. He has met God in his struggle, a meeting that leaves no one unchanged.

We are never too old to be changed by God. If we are willing to face our conflicts and deepest fears with faith in God we can move ahead. But we may also limp with wounded pride living from the graces of God instead of always living from our own strength, always having to be right. That is a heavy burden that we should gladly give to God. But old attitudes, old sinful habits and habits of behavior are not easy to change. We may need to continue to begin many a day persistently asking God to help us change.

Later on in history when Yiddish, Jewish German, borrowed the word 'chutzpah' from Hebrew, it gave it a more positive connotation, meaning 'guts bordering on the heroic'. To illustrate, we are brought into a rather familiar scene in our gospel story this morning, a sort of mid-eastern version of "Court TV". The widow in our gospel story has a lot of 'chutzpah'. She is a wronged widow, who comes into a particular judge's courtroom every day to inch her way under his skin.

The judge is a totally unsympathetic character. He is crooked. He is quite capable of making mincemeat of anyone over whom he wields power. In writing about this story a 13<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian chronicler told the story, "a lay brother was once heard to pray to Christ: 'Lord, if thou free me not from this temptation, I will complain of thee to my mother.'"

The widow was persistent. She was really persistent, so persistent that she finally got the attention of the unjust judge who ruled on her behalf, just to finally get rid of her and spare his own reputation.

Before we go on the real meaning of today's gospel story, several other points need to be made. The first is that God wants us to be persistent in our prayer. God is on the side of this widow. This is not just a story about one poor and socially abused widow. She represents the poor of her society, the marginalized. God gives them voice so that in their persistence they can call attention to their plight and change society.

But it is also true that if we pray something often enough we will also find that the praying becomes a sort of meditation that brings clarity to our lives. We understand on deeper levels just what it is we are praying for. We also realize that as we are freed to move deeper into our concerns, that God is waiting there with open arms to help us in still new and unexpected ways. Persistence in prayer is not nagging until we get our way.

It is trusting God to hear our deepest concerns and respond to them. It is also trusting God in the end, no matter what.

This week at JoAnn Ulvestad's funeral the family chose "What A Friend We Have In Jesus" as the closing hymn. "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear. What a privilege to carry, everything, to God in prayer." The point of today's parable of the persistent widow is according to Joachim Jeremias, "If this inconsiderate man, who has refused to hear the widow's case, finally gives heed to her distress, and that after long delay, only to rid himself of the incessant pestering of the plaintiff, how much more will God!" God must really be merciful, because showing wrath, God shows patience and mercy. And the next step is to expect God to change us.

A student who had been visiting a spiritual master was discouraged, "Why" he asked, "has my stay here yielded no fruit?" "Perhaps," replied his master, "because you have lacked the courage to shake the tree." Persistence in prayer reaches us to shake the tree – not our neighbor's tree or the master's tree, but our own, the one we ourselves have been given to prune and tend.

And with this Jesus gets to the whole point of his parable for us today. He ends with the question, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus is, I believe, taking "chutzpah" one final step farther. "Chutzpah" is more than repeating some heroic act to catch God's attention whether it be prayer or something else.

Real "chutzpah" becomes faith that trusts in God, even after we have prayed long and hard and are still waiting for an answer. Perhaps it means, and this is not easy to say, perhaps it means trusting in God until the very end when Christ returns, even when there doesn't seem to be an answer. It means that in the end Christ will become the answer to all of our prayers. For some things we must wait, but knowing that Jesus promises in the end to answer our prayers in person, Jesus is the only one who is worth waiting for? That's "holy chutzpah!" But how do we wait?

I made a mistake this week in not including our fourth lesson in our readings this morning. In his letter to Timothy Paul urges Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel. He urges young Timothy to carry out his ministry fully. The early church and Timothy are growing up."

It is interesting that in both of our stories today Jacob and the widow are, for good reason, persistent in prayer because they need something for themselves. As we grow in our faith, our suffering for the gospel, what we pray for changes in our maturing.

The gospel is really all that God had done for us, especially through Jesus Christ. We pray over and over again for forgiveness. Once we are forgiven do we then go on the next step and pray over and over again to change our hearts so that we won't need to be forgiven of that particular sin? That is one way of growing, maturing in our faith.

And finally, as our hearts are filled over and over again with God's goodness, do we persistently thank God? And do our prayers mature still one final step farther? Do we ask God to fill our lives in such a way that we give out of generosity just as God has first given everything to us? Do we ask over and over for God to make us more generous people until we are finally brought to living godly lives. That is a real challenge. That is "holy chutzpah"! Amen!