

October 16, 2016

Text: Luke 18:1-8

Theme: Faith is pestering God.

"Look! Look!" shouted the bear cubs. "Little rubber cats that stick out their tongues when you squeeze them!" "Cubs," said Mama, "that will be quite enough! I don't want to hear another word" "Oh please!" they shouted. "May we have them? Please! Please! Please!" Papa decided it was time to put a stop to all the fussing.... "Of all the outrageous, disgraceful, EMBARRASSING behavior I have ever seen," he roared.... "Brother and Sister have the worst case of the galloping greedy gimmies I've ever seen!" Anyone recognize that story? It's from *The Berenstain Bears Get the Gimmies*, one in a series of popular picture books by Stan and Jan Berenstain.

I remember reading this story to my sons when they were small and of course, we all know the moral of this story – do not pester your parents and throw a temper tantrum for what you want. The galloping greedy gimmies is not a pretty site to witness! We need to teach our children early and often to act in more appropriate ways, to accept “no” for an answer and be content with what they have.

But that is not the way the woman in our gospel story acts. In fact, she seems to have a bad case of those galloping greedy gimmies. She pesters and bothers, throws a hissy fit, is so obnoxious that she finally gets an unjust judge to give in and give her what she asks for. And what makes her behavior even more interesting is that this story is told in response to Jesus' teaching about prayer – this is an appropriate way to pray?? – and with the question at the end – will the Son of Man find faith on earth, implying that she is an example of faith?? Throw into the mix our Old Testament reading from Genesis which has Jacob wrestling with the person, angel, God?? until he gets his blessing. Talk about being demanding and stubborn!

I thought patience was a virtue; serenely accepting God's will; being grateful with what we have been given; certainly not arguing, not to mention pestering, bothering, wrestling with God. Yet these stories give us a deeper view of faith – it is indeed about pestering God. And that is the theme of my sermon today: Faith is pestering God.

To be honest with you, I have always resonated with these stories because I have experienced much of my faith life to be wrestling with God. From early on, I was never the kid in Sunday school who just accepted the easy answers, things at face value but was always questioning. Why do we always and only call God “he?” The Bible says let “us” create humankind, male and female, in our image. Why are men the only ones who are ushers in the church? Isn't that something I could do? I know that I was not my teachers' favorite student. And it has just gotten worse the older I get. Platitudes just don't do it for me. And yet, at the same time, I long for things to be simple because wrestling all the time can be exhausting. There is a part of me that would like to have the view – this is what the Bible says, no arguments, no interpretations, just accept it and do it! Wouldn't that make it easier in so many of the challenges we face – such as whether to have weddings of same gender couples in our church buildings, or the focus of our mission and how to grow the church or how to deal with all the political rhetoric that fills the airways. Just tell us what to believe, what to do – give us the list of rules so that we can use it as a measuring stick to judge and draw neat, clean lines between who is good and who is bad. Think of how much easier my job would be if I could just make pronouncements, decide what we need to do, and have people just accept my judgments. Like the age old response that parents have used throughout the generations when asked by their children, but why, why do I have to do that? **Because I said so!**

I really do get that desire. But and this is a big but – that is not what faith is. It is not a doctrine to believe. It is not a list of rules to follow. It is a relationship with God through Christ and relationships are not neat and simple, but complicated and always evolving. And the only way I know to engage in this

relationship with any kind of depth and authenticity is by wrestling, pestering, bothering – not letting go or giving in until we get that blessing, get that justice.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in an article she wrote for Christian Century years ago entitled "Bothering God," explains it this way. *I have a 7-year-old granddaughter by marriage named Madeline. She is blond, skinny and tall for her age. ...What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty. When she complains that none of this does any good, I am going to ask her to tell me the difference between how she feels while she is praying versus how she feels when she thinks about giving up. If I am lucky, she is going to tell me that she feels more alive when she is praying, and that is when I will tell her the story about the persistent widow...*

I think Jesus tells this story about this widow, who has no right to think she has any power and yet keeps pestering the unjust judge because this is how God wants us to be in relationship with God, how God wants us to pray. This is not just saying it is okay to argue and pester (something most of us growing up are taught is not appropriate in our relationship with God). But this is an invitation from God to wrestle, pester, because we are engaged in a relationship that takes seriously our questions, our needs, our struggles, our lives as well as takes seriously God's promise to bless us; God's promise to bring justice; God's promise to never let us go.

The only way we can do this kind of wrestling, which as I mentioned earlier can be exhausting and difficult, even cause conflict within communities of faith – what is the RIGHT – is because we have a God who has entered into a relationship with us, who does indeed desire that we have life and have it abundantly, whose will is for justice and wholeness. In our gospel story the judge is described as being unjust, having no respect for people. And yet the woman persists. Her pursuit of justice is stronger than his unjustness. (Let that thought roll around in your head for a moment – how might the world look if our pursuit of justice was stronger and more persistent than the injustice that seems so pervasive in our world.) Anyway, we do not persist, bother, wrestling with an unjust judge but with a God who so loved the world, that God sent the only Son to turn the world upside down and usher in God's reign of peace and mercy. We wrestle with a God who even when we are tired and worn out and don't know what to believe or do, will not let us go and will indeed bless us.

When I was in junior high, I was in the band. All the band members were supposed to wear purple sweaters, on which our band letters would be sewn. Well, these sweaters, which were ordered from a local store, were a deep rich purple and very expensive. My parents couldn't afford to buy me the sweater so my mom purchased a much less expensive white sweater and some purple dye. After she dyed the sweater, it was obvious that it not the right color purple. So I started praying. I asked God, please, please, please change the color of the sweater so I would not be embarrassed when I wore the sweater to school. I woke up the next morning fully expecting that God had indeed answered my prayer. I went to the laundry room to get my sweater and there it hung – the same light purple it was the night before but (and this is a big but) it no longer bothered me that my sweater looked different. I wore it to school that day and was just fine.

We know that we don't always get what we pray for and that it is not always fine in our lives and in our world. Prayer is not a magic wand that fixes everything. It is a relationship with a God who doesn't want to be let off the hook, just as God won't let us off the hook. So keep asking, bothering, pestering, wrestling – and Jesus will indeed find faith on earth and that faith will make a difference not just for us but for the world. Amen.