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# Let's Wrestle!

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This sermon begins in a nerdy place.

I know, I know, I was shocked too. But take yourself back to 1984. The Apple Computer company had just launched the Macintosh computer. This machine, widely believed to be the pinnacle of computing in its day, boasted 128 kilobytes of RAM, a 400 kilobyte hard drive, and a monochrome display. For such a machine, the user could expect to pay \$2495. Compare that to this device in my pocket, the iPhone 6s. It was released last year, comes with 2 gigabytes of RAM (Roughly 16,000 times the power of the original Mac) and a 32 gigabyte hard drive (roughly 83,000 times larger than the Mac), has an HD display, fits in my pocket, includes a headphone jack, and doesn't explode. And for all that, I paid \$549.

Imagine after creating the Mac, which again was the pinnacle of computing at the time, Apple executives said "That's it! We're done! We've achieved all we can, there's no need to work on this thing, it's all good!" Apple would be completely out of business today. But imagine at that same time, Steve Jobs looking ahead and saying "our next computer is going to be a phone!" There's no way! You can't jump from 1984 technology straight to 2015 technology; you have to go through a process. Bit by bit, year by year, update by update, Apple slowly moved from where they were with the original Mac to where they are today. Change happened, but it happened slowly.

This leads us, as expected, to the parable. To my knowledge, this is one of the very few parables where we are given its meaning clearly and up front. This one is about praying always, and not losing heart. We'll come back to the "always" nature of prayer in a little bit, but let's ask ourselves

this question: What is it that causes the disciples of Jesus both then and now to loose heart?

Perhaps, we could glean from the parable; it is a lack of justice in the world that might cause disciples to loose heart. This parable has a lot of detail, a certain city, this particular widow, that particular judge. But there are some pretty big holes in detail around who this mysterious opponent is, and what exactly he or she has done to wrong the widow. We don't get to know that. And in parables especially, when we see that kind of lack of detail in a particular area, I think Jesus is inviting you and I to place ourselves in the story. Those details are left for us to fill in ourselves.

So is it hard to imagine today a world lacking in justice? Is it hard to imagine a world where 1 in 9 people don't have access to enough food to lead a healthy, active lifestyle? Is it hard to imagine a world where half the population (3 billion people) lives on less than \$2.50 a day? (For comparison's sake, the median income for families in Upper Saint Clair is \$295 a day.) Is it hard to imagine a world where the United States makes up 4% of the world's population, yet accounts for 22% of its prison inmates? Is it hard to imagine a world where countless opponents take advantage of the left out, left behind, and vulnerable? No, I don't think it is.

Now the word for justice that both the widow and Jesus use in this story is interesting. The Greek word is *ekdikesis*, and while it does sometimes get translated as "justice", it even more is translated "punish, punishment," and even more still translated "vengeance." It's as if the widow is saying to the judge "The wound is real, the damage is done, I'm slain. Who will step in and fight for me? Who is going to avenge me? Who will fight the battles that I know I can't win?" This is sometimes what it feels like when someone lists statistics

like I just did. We feel like we're locked in a battle there's no chance we'll win. And so we pray. For me at least, when we offer these kinds of prayers, it can feel a good bit like we're wrestling with God.

I love this story in the Old Testament. Jacob has a name that means "ankle grabber." He was defined from the very beginning, and he's done a pretty good job living up to that definition. He stole his brother's birthright and blessing by trickery and deceit, and it's hard to overstate the importance of both those things in that culture. Jacob has stacked the deck in his favor at his older brother's expense. So naturally he's on the run. His brother is about to meet him, and he's scared for what that meeting might look like. So he sends his family, his possessions, everything he's ever known and loved across the river and he is left alone...

...and then he starts wrestling! I love how much that idea comes out of nowhere in this story. Jacob is alone one second, and the next he's wrestling a complete stranger. There are quite a few theories of who this mystery man is, but most people would agree that in some sort of understanding of the situation Jacob is in fact wrestling with the Divine. Jacob himself seems to recognize this, as he simply won't let this man go without getting a blessing. Like the widow, Jacob absolutely won't give up. Maybe it's because Jacob wants to win a clean fight for once in his life, or maybe it's just that he recognizes the power of who he's wrestling.

We don't know exactly what kind of blessing Jacob had in mind, but I'm willing to bet it's not the blessing he got. But we recognize that Jacob is completely changed by the struggle with God. For one thing, he actually walks away limping! But for another, he's been given a new name. He's not the ankle

grabber any more. He's Israel. He has a new outlook. He has a new identity. He has a new label.

...but not yet. Exactly one sentence later the author of Genesis refers to him as Jacob. He's different, but he's the same. He has a new outlook on life, but he's still going to have to deal with the consequences of his actions. He's got a kingdom vision, but still lives in the world as it is. He is still the same person, but the struggle with God has left him changed.

Are we changed?

I think this is why Jesus wants us to pray always. It's not that God is stingy, as if he has a counter saying to himself "...38...39...40. Ok, now I'll answer your prayer." That's not in God's character. No, I think Jesus recognizes that this type of wrestling prayer changes us. Bit by tiny little bit, our persistent prayers and demands for justice take us from who we are to who we're meant to be. The church has historically called this Transformation. Through these wrestling prayers we can slowly have the labels that have either been applied to us or that we've applied to ourselves removed. We can get new labels, new names, new ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us. We can get a kingdom vision.

It's a bit like Apple computers. If you find yourself saying "I am the pinnacle of Christian perfection! There's nothing left for me to achieve," then you might have some wrestling to do. And if you find yourself in this particular moment looking ahead to all the ways you could be better, all the ways you'd like to improve yourself, and you want badly to jump from here to there, you also have some wrestling to do. These transformations happen slowly, over time, and with lots of wrestling.

But, I think we know that wrestling hurts. It can leave us limping at the end of the struggle. And so I think many of us do our level best to run away from prayer as wrestling. There are all sorts of strategies for this, but I know a few of the more popular ones among us.

There's the vending machine prayer. Kind of like putting our coins in the slot, pushing the buttons, and getting our candy, this kind of prayer only asks God for things. There's no struggle in these prayers, only desire. And, as someone who works with kids, that's a perfectly OK place to start when we're learning to pray, but we really can't stay there. If we only pray to a vending machine God, we remain unchanged.

Then there are some like me who are totally impatient when it comes to praying to God. We want our prayers answered on our terms, on our own timeline. And yet frequently, I find that God has little regard for me and for my timeline. We forget that sometimes our seasons of hearing God say "no" or "not yet" are part of the wrestling process. And, so we avoid prayer all together, and we remain unchanged.

Or perhaps, we have too small a vision for our prayer life. I know many Christians who have said to me that God isn't interested in hearing their prayers, that surely God has better things to do. This couldn't be farther from the truth! God wants to hear from his children, in big ways and in small. But when we avoid the wrestling match because we feel like we don't belong there, we too will remain unchanged.

We have to wrestle, and I think there are a lot of ways to do that. First, we have to tune in. As a musician I am always painfully aware of out of tune guitar players. It just sounds awful. To tune a guitar means to bring it into harmony with itself, and for our part we need to be in tune with God. At the



end of the parable, Jesus asks if he will find faith on earth. The Greek word here is *pistis*, which means more than simply getting all the answers right on the theological exam. It means knowing. Will Jesus find people who know God?

I have always wondered when it is that boys figure out how to wrestle with their dad. Most boys I know have engaged in more than a few wrestling matches, and as the father of twins now I can tell you that this all starts at about 9 months old. I can now lay down on the floor in our living room, and both boys will stop doing whatever they were engaged in, crawl over to me, raise their fists, and start punching me in the kidneys. Of course as a dad I love it, because I don't really think this has anything to do with violence or wrestling per se. I think this is just one of the ways my boys are getting to know me. They want contact. They want intimacy. And so they wrestle. And through this wrestling we get to know each other. We tune in.

One of the ways I think we can know that we're out of tune with God is when we can't think of any justice issues to pray for. I think that it takes strength and commitment and awareness to pray for justice for our brothers and sisters around the world. And it takes a working knowledge of God. So we have to tune in.

We also have to hang on. When it comes to transformation, there doesn't seem to be a drive-through option. Think about Apple. They weren't content with where they were, but they didn't get too caught up in where they were going. They got there through tiny baby steps, little updates here and there. It's the same thing for us. The kind of transformation that God is looking for with us can take a lifetime. Jacob absolutely won't let God go without receiving a blessing. He hangs on. Will we let God go without our own blessing of

transformation? Are we willing to wrestle for the long haul?  
Are we willing to hang on?

And finally, we have to participate. What if in all of our prayers for justice, God is calling us to act on behalf of another? What if you are the answer to your own prayers? This can happen in both big and small matters of justice by the way. I've loved being here the last few weeks and hearing virtually everyone in the congregation asking "What are we going to do about Haiti?" There is this understanding around here that something needs to be done, and that we are the ones to do it. There are profound conversations happening in these hallways about justice and kingdom living on a global scale, and an equally important commitment to making it happen.

But, this also happens in small places. Saturday, I had the privilege of bringing a few youth on the Produce to the People event. It was such a joy to actually place food in someone's cart and walk with them to their car. It was only a morning's worth of time, but it was remarkably well spent time. Earlier this week I was doing some shopping down on the South Side, and I met a homeless man with an interesting sales pitch. He was trying to sell jokes. So I pulled out a couple of dollars from my pocket, and he told me a joke that I absolutely cannot repeat from the pulpit. And then I sat with him and told him a few jokes of my own. I can't say for sure, but I'm willing to bet that those few moments of recognizing him as human were more valuable than the two bucks I gave him. You are met with these opportunities each and every day. That's why it's critical that we not pray for God to feed hungry people if we are unwilling to feed them. We can't pray for lonely people if we are unwilling to sit with them. So frequently I think God is calling

us to participate in the miracles that our prayers seek out. We just need to be willing to go.

So my friends, do you need a software update? Are you in need of transformation? Do you have your eyes set on who God is calling you to be? If so, pray always. Don't lose heart. And whatever you do, don't run away from the wrestling match.

Amen.



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