

Sermon – Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8
David R. Lyle
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“Hang On!”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I knew the words were true long before I first heard them sung by Mick Jagger: “You can’t always get what you want.” I knew it to be true because I wanted a lot, and I never got it all. For birthdays and Christmases, year after year as a child, I would handwrite extensive lists of gifts suggestions. Books, cassette tapes, action figures, LEGO sets, sporting goods, on and on. Come to think of it, my wish lists haven’t changed that much, although I no longer have a tape deck. Most of each list went unfulfilled. And that was okay, even at the time. Part of why I made the lists so long was to maintain the element of surprise; it gave my parents something to choose from. I was also well aware that my parents were neither wealthy nor inclined to spoil their children. As a parent, I’ve realized there’s another factor in play: there were things my parents simply didn’t want me to have, either to preserve my well-being or their own sanity. The preacher John Buchanan, reflecting on this theme, notes, “I had two good and loving parents.” But when he requested a toy drum set he’d seen in the Sears catalog? He writes, simply, “My requests were heard and turned down.” I remember wanting a drum set as a child, too, but my sympathies lie with Pastor Buchanan’s pastors. There’s not a scenario under the sun in which I would purchase a drum set for my children. Sorry, kids; you can’t always get what you want, no matter how many times you ask.

2. But what about when we want more than a drum set, or toys, or a new baseball mitt? What about when we yearn for justice, for this world to be and become a better place? And what about when the one we petition is not a parent or another human, but God? Do we ask for too much? Can we ask too often? Is faith always getting what you want? Jesus tells a parable: A widow, one who lives at the socioeconomic margins, is in need of justice. We don't know her particular petition, but the judge in the parable does not dispute the validity of her claims. He doesn't disagree with her, he just doesn't care – not for her, not for her claims, not for much of anything other than himself. Hers is not an easy life, and no one is doing much to make it easier. Yet this woman refuses to give in or shut up.

3. Last night, our ten confirmands stood in this space, speaking up and offering their witness statements. Beyond their wisdom, I was struck by a simple fact. Not one of them stood in the lectern or pulpit and said anything like this: Faith makes everything easy. Not one of them said that faith means getting everything you want. In fact, it seems these young people have learned that faith isn't easy or clear at all. Evy says, "When I went to church when I was younger, I always imagined everyone having a strong faith and an unbreakable relationship with God." I remember feeling the same way when I was young; Evy's statement rings true for many of us. As we grow in years and faith, we realize that faith does not mean having it all figured out, and it certainly doesn't mean having everything we want handed to us. Jesus' parable shows the judge granting justice to the woman eventually, but faith isn't proven by the result. Faith is living with hope even when the outcome is uncertain; faith is trusting in God regardless of the outcome. Faith is persistently hanging on no matter what.

4. Jacob's coming-of-age was a bit different than that of our confirmands (I hope!). Whatever your family's issues might be, this guy's family likely has you beat. Having stolen both birthright and blessing from his older brother,

he goes to live with his uncle. As that familial bond weakens, despite marrying both of Laban's daughters, Jacob heads back toward Esau and an unknown fate. As the sun sets over his camp, Jacob is confronted by a stranger. They wrestle throughout the night, the outcome uncertain. The grappler turns out to be God, who tells Jacob to let go. But Jacob refuses to release his grasp. Not until God blesses him. In turn, God gives Jacob a new name: Israel, the one who struggles with God. Not the one who gets all they want; not the one for whom everything is easy. The ones who struggle with God; that is what it means to be people chosen by God. Faith persists in hanging on.

5. Faith hands on because it knows we're not alone. The unjust judge ain't much, and the God of Jacob isn't easy, but neither the widow nor Jacob are alone. How much more is God's presence promised to us? Kaitlyn states it clearly: "No matter what happens, God is always with me." Yes. This a promise we can trust based not on what happens, but upon the One who is with us. As Jesus notes, if even this judge will finally listen, is God not with us? Elsa, reflecting on how hard it is to discern God's presence, particularly at night, writes, "I struggle with feeling alone and forgotten, but God's Spirit constantly proved to me that I was wrong. I'm never alone." So the psalmist today: this Lord doesn't slumber. This God is with you.

6. Trusting we're not alone, faith gives us the patience to persist. Whether in the darkness of the night or in the face of injustice, it is not easy. That's why it's faith. Ryan, thinking back on a time in which he was literally lost in the night, discovered faith in the loving response of others, helping him see God's presence in the night: "God will also," Ryan writes, "be at my side throughout the difficult times, because he's my rock and refuge." Again, the psalmist: "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." But we wait not only for ourselves; we wait for justice to roll like life-giving waters over creation, slaking the thirst of those in need. Goodness knows the need is

deep. Graham, writing about those who suffer because of unjust immigration policies, or because of violence and war, or because of various phobias and “-isms,” reminds us that change comes slowly, but change does come: “I also need to remember, “he says, “that nothing will happen within a snap. It takes time to make change.” But because Jesus effects radical change through his self-giving love, we can cling to hope that change will come. In hope, we can work for that change. This work can be grand, but grandness begins in the everyday. With kindness, as Meredith reminds, us, for “with kindness, I see God’s peace.” Or in each and every choice, as Isaiah points out, making every choice “with God’s commandments in mind.”

7. Waiting in hope, clinging in faith is not always easy. Sometimes it’s the last thing we want to do. The injustice and unfairness we see and experience makes such trust so hard. Adrienne, sharing about a particularly challenging injury, remembers feeling, “I was so mad at God, and I thought nothing was fair.” Who hasn’t thought the same? And yet, like Adrienne, we hang on. We hang not only for ourselves, but for those who suffer injustice. We pray like the woman in the parable, refusing to quiet down until justice comes. And the funny thing about such prayer is that it is open-eyed and eye-opening. When we pray for those who suffer injustice, our lives are awakened to become part of prayer’s answer. Our prayers open us to live in solidarity with those who suffer, and our living begins to take cues from our praying. As the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said after participating in a 1965 civil rights’ march from Selma to Montgomery, “I felt my legs were praying.” May our legs walk where our prayers talk!

8. As we pray, we follow Jesus into this world’s deepest needs. While Jesus does not have much in common with his parable’s unjust judge, this much is similar: For the sake of those in need, they both allow themselves to be ground down and worn out. But where the judge is simply annoyed, Jesus pours himself out. To atone for sin and answer supplication, Jesus enters all

the way into death, that life may emerge. Julia reflects on her grandfather's recent death, a hard experience of loss for any young person to endure. As Julia says, "I prayed every night asking Jesus to be with my grandpa in heaven, and I know he will be because he died on the cross to save us." Whatever we want, we always get what we need from our God. Life and salvation, in this world and the next, for the sake of our crucified and risen Lord.

9. Our confirmands help us remember that faith is not having everything figured out. After all, Emerson and Evelyn were baptized this morning; these little ones are not able to tell you what faith means. But faith is more than what it means. Faith is what it does, clinging to Christ as the One from whom life and justice flow. Whether you are newly baptized today, or newly confirmed, or even if you're not sure why you're here or what you know, you can trust in this: Pray to God, for God will never stop listening. Cry out for justice, and then work for it. Hold onto God, for God will never let you go. Faith, you might say, isn't what you know. It's who you know. So, since I'm not sure of a better summation of faith, I'll let Ethan have the last word: "I love Jesus, and Jesus loves me." Amen and amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.