

Genesis 32:22-31
Luke 18:1-8

Hang In There
Crossroads Christian Church
October 20, 2013 Pentecost 22C
Michael Dixon

What's the hardest thing you have ever gotten through in your life? And what did it take to get through it?

For Will, who had a troubled adolescence and weight issues when he joined the military, it was basic training. Later, it was service in a combat zone.

For Heather, it was a difficult pregnancy, with long periods of bed rest, frequent hospitalization for false alarms, and life-threatening infection at the time of delivery. Her son was premature, but healthy.

For Juan, it was following a dream of being the first person in his family to go to college, even though his family was poor. Through academic and athletic scholarships, and hard work in summer jobs and campus jobs, he made it through, and eventually became a teacher and coach.

For Joan, it was leaving an abusive spouse and taking her kids to a shelter for battered families, and then finding a new life for herself as a single mom.

For Darrell, it was finally getting his life squared away after years of addictive behavior, of abusing and being abused by drugs and alcohol. He knows that he's still an alcoholic, but each year for the past five he's been sober.

"Nancy" found out about 6 weeks ago that her father, who had been quite active, was having strokes. While making a diagnosis about the strokes, the doctors found inoperable cancer; he has about 6 months to live. Then the health care insurance company she has worked for over 10 years decided to shut down her department. This week, she is not only out of work but dealing with the impending death of her father.

So what is it for you? What's your challenge in life, maybe one you've overcome, maybe one you're still struggling with?

Sometimes life is hard; life can be very hard. Obstacles can seem overwhelming. Sometimes people just give up, and don't try anymore. Other times, no matter how hard they try, people

get overwhelmed by tragedy. Sometimes we hear or say the expression, “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle,” but we know deep down that some people are given more than they can handle—whether by God or circumstance, or whatever.

And sometimes, even living comfortable lives financially, even surrounded by people we love, we just get discouraged and restless, and wonder why we aren’t getting more out of life. And sometimes, in our Christian faith, we feel blah spiritually, and drift away from a living relationship with God and the church, and wonder why God seems so far off when it is really us who strayed like lost sheep.

With all this introspection whirling through our minds, let’s look at our two scripture readings. This week’s lectionary had 2 possible OT texts, and I decided to skip Jeremiah to look back at Genesis to the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, or maybe with God, a story filled with mystery, and a story that is woven into the identity of the whole people of Israel, even down to today.

Let’s see the story as part of a larger whole. Remember how Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, gave birth to twins, and that Jacob was the younger of the two, but that his hand reached out and grabbed his older brother Esau by the heel, to pull him back in? Later, as they grew up, Esau was his father Isaac’s favorite, a ruddy, strong hunter who brought meat for the table. Jacob was a momma’s boy, quiet, calculating, hanging around camp. As the oldest, Esau would have had the birthright, double the inheritance, and would have become the leader of the clan—until the day that Esau came in hungry and Jacob connived to get Esau to sell his birthright for a tasty supper! Later, with Rebekah’s help, Jacob disguised himself as Esau and took Esau’s blessing as his own—together, that made him one up on Esau. But it also got him into deep trouble, and it was time to get out of Dodge. Jacob went back to Rebekah’s home town to find a bride, and there, the trickster got tricked, and had to work 14 years to get 2 brides.

Finally, Jacob knew that it was time to go home, time to become reconciled with his brother, or to die trying. So, with his new family, he traveled toward home. He sent ahead rich gifts to bribe Esau, but still he wondered. The night before their reunion,

they camped alongside the river Jabbock. Jacob wandered, wrestling with his fears, maybe with his guilt, unable to sleep, then he encountered a figure in the dark. They wrestled, and Jacob held on for dear life, all through the night. The stranger struck a blow that put Jacob's hip out of joint, which marked him for life with a limp. But Jacob wouldn't let go until he received what? A blessing. And the stranger not only blessed Jacob, but renamed him Israel, which means "the one who strives with God." Jacob hung in there. He never gave up.

In that way, the persistent widow in Jesus' parable was a true daughter of Jacob, in that she never gave up. She had a case against another person, and no matter how many times the judge dismissed her case, she'd keep coming back. Now the judge was a crook, and an arrogant one at that. He didn't fear God or respect people. He was in it for himself. He could care less that God's law tried to give preference for widows and orphans and strangers in the land. But every time the court would come to session, there she'd be, that pesky, stubborn, determined widow, standing in line, waiting for her turn. Well, after about the 5,978th time, the judge was worn to a frazzle. He'd dream about seeing her the next day and wake up screaming. So finally, he's reduced to talking to himself—that actually happens a lot in Luke—and says, "I don't fear God or respect people, but I'm going to give that woman justice anyway, because she's wearing me to a frazzle, driving me crazy, and it's just plain embarrassing to face her day after day after day after day."

After telling the story, Jesus says, "Listen to what the unjust judge has to say. Won't God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" And then Jesus asks, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This is another if-then parable. It makes a comparison and contrast. Jesus is speaking to a people who have longed for God to come rescue them. They were poor, they were suffering, they struggled to put food on the table, the Romans and their own leaders lorded it over them. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer—sound familiar, again? Would it ever get better? So Jesus drew this funny picture of a what's-in-it-for-me judge, totally corrupt and uninterested in justice unless he got a kickback,

being pestered by this steely, stubborn old woman until he finally gives in. Then comes the if-then. If the crooked judge can be worn down into giving justice, then won't God, who is good and just and loving, and wants the very best for God's children, give justice as well? Hang in there. Trust in God. Don't ever give up. But then Jesus adds that poignant line, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" In other words, will God's children really hang in there when things are tough? Or will they lose faith and trust?

The parable is about faith and prayer. Sometimes our spiritual lives seem dried up and we don't feel close to God. Sometimes our real, day-to-day lives are just so stressed out and demanding that we skip prayer as a luxury we can't afford, something we just don't have time for in the pressure of taking care of an ailing child or aging parent or demanding boss. But that's exactly when we need prayer, when we need faith, the most. God isn't far from us when we feel far from God. So, never give up.

This speaks to us as a church, too. It's easy to get discouraged. We remember back to when lots more people came to church and the Sunday school classes were filled with kids, CYF was a big thing for teens, and the CWF circles were always busy. It's not just us here, but the majority of churches in America are in decline. Sometimes in some churches, discouragement leads to anger or fault-finding. Other times it leads to apathy. But Jacob and Jesus are both telling us not to give up, not to give in, but to find new ways to be God's faithful people. We can find creative ways to minister. We may grow, or we may not grow—but we must be faithful. We must hang in there, not just to keep a particular congregation alive, but to be just what the world needs—a community of faith where love can transform lives. Amen.