

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

Luke 18:1-8

10/20/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke,

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Jacob/Israel

Good Morning! Have you ever struggled? I mean really struggled? I've told this story in parts, but never the whole, and man was it a struggle. I have had a like/hate relationship with the language of the New Testament, biblical Greek. I like it, I appreciate it, but it certainly hates me. This relationship started in college. Dr. Willimsun, one of the theology professors at Wheeling Jesuit University, decided to teach an experimental class on koine Greek. I was never any good at languages, but I hadn't really ever tried either. I was a theology and religious studies major, and I knew I would need to take it in seminary, so I signed up. We covered the very basics, hitting nouns and verbs, and that was about it. Thank God, we never even got to participles! Because the class was experimental, we all passed, but it was clear that this was something that wasn't going to be easy for me.

A few years later I signed up for seminary at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC. It was time for things to get serious. There are two ways to take Greek at seminary: the first is to arrive at school in the beginning of July and spend 6 weeks doing Greek for six hours a day, Monday through Friday. I'm told by the end of week two you start dreaming about Greek. I knew that if I did that, it would end in my death. So I signed up for the other Greek option, Greek every Monday evening for two semesters. This was a three hour class, on Monday evening. I thought my brief intro in undergraduate would help me out, but we moved past the alphabet before the first class was even over!

A good friend who also took Greek with me, remembers fondly the moment we both realized that something was wrong. After the first exam we would turn in the test,

leave the room, and wait outside. Since the class was once a week we had an hour and half for the test, but then we had to come BACK and spend the second half working again! My friend Chris took the test, was one of the first to turn in his test, and went outside. He knew I was struggling, so when I came outside shortly after, he was surprised. My response? You can't answer what you don't know. I still have a picture of us laying on the ground outside of the building in pain and suffering during a break.

I didn't pass the first semester of Greek. I wasn't the first, but it was definitely a blow to my sense of call and my self esteem. I had to wait an entire year to take the final again, joining in with the next batch of seminarians. I was able to pass, which put me halfway through Greek. My second year of seminary we spent the first semester on what I called Greek II. When the end of the year came, it was do or die. I needed to pass Greek to take Gospels in the spring. But once again... I failed. I was destroyed. This meant that because I couldn't take Gospels, I couldn't go on internship with all my friends, that I would be a year behind. It was worse than I thought, I would need to wait a whole year to do this all again. This was two class credits that I was now behind.

Fortunately, my Greek professor, Dr. Peterson, was frustrated too. Dr. Peterson is one of the most intelligent people I have ever met, and unlike some academics, he knew how to teach, too. He was determined to get this darn language into my head, regardless of the cost. So he made me a proposition: we would meet every Monday afternoon in his office, one-on-one, and by the end of the second semester, either the two of us would figure this out, or... well I'm not even sure, we were determined! It was during this third attempt, which I appropriately named Greek III, that I also had to learn Hebrew. The good news was that all this basically drove me to a breakdown and so I started seeing a

counselor and psychiatrist. It was then that I was diagnosed with ADHD, and was able to begin taking medication that would help me focus, and hopefully learn. At the end of the semester, I sat down in a classroom by myself to take the Greek final. After turning in the test, I headed back towards my apartment, getting a phone call from Dr. Peterson before I even got the door opened. "Come back to my office!" he demanded. It turns out he was just as excited to see this finished as I was, grading the test immediately. I walked into the office to determine my fate. I needed at least a 70% to pass... my grade was a 70.9! By the skin of my teeth I had passed! But man was it a fight.

To this day, it remains the hardest thing I have ever done. I had always felt called to ministry, but my struggle made me question everything I thought I knew about my vocation. Was God really calling me to be a pastor? Or was I being too stubborn and ignoring the signals? It was also a very public struggle, everyone at seminary knew what was going on. And even though they were all rooting for me, it was still embarrassing. Greek was a point of major wrestling with God for me. It was during all of this that our story from Genesis, a story I had always loved, became even more important for me.

Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32 is my favorite Old Testament story, maybe my favorite story in the whole Bible. In order to get what's going on, we need to jump back a little in the story. Jacob is the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. When Isaac was old and blind Jacob stole the family blessing that would have been for his older brother Esau. This basically made Jacob the head of the family. Esau was understandably upset, and Jacob picked up the cues and skipped town before his brother Esau could kill him. After traveling around, Jacob begins to return home. He sends a messenger to his brother and is told that he will be met with 400 men. It's after

this message that we pick up today's story, Jacob pacing in the night, imagining his death.

It's then that a stranger arrives, and the two wrestle, they fight. Before the sun rises Jacob is struck on the hip, a lasting wound to remind him of the struggle. Jacob could have fled again. He could have run away when he heard about his brother coming with 400 men. But I imagine that he struggled that evening with his identity, with his faith. What kind of person did Jacob want to be? The story is ambiguous, the stranger could have been a regular person, some believe it was an angel, and others that he wrestled with God. Regardless of what happened, it remains a powerful reminder that faithful people don't have to be perfect.

None of us do this right all the time. Our lives of faith are struggles in the dark of the night, moments when we are alone and wonder if this is all really worth it. But come morning, the sun still rises. Yes, we might have lasting marks, but the scars become badges of honor, signs and markers for greatest victories. For me, it was Greek, for Jacob, it was his past, for the rest of us? Who knows, but yet here we are, a little tired, a little sore, and yet blessed all the same. Amen.