

Kept And Named – Niquita Hohm

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Oh Unjust Judge. How absurd of you to fear being worn out by a lowly widow and yet *have no fear of God*. How short-sighted of you to be more concerned with temporary inconveniences than the things that last. Now, we know this is a caricature of course, but before we get carried away with it, it would be good to remember that we too turn complex, multi-dimensional people, oftentimes our enemies specifically, into caricatures who only bumble about in their faults. Merely being worn out may not actually be what he's hoping to avoid. To translate it more literally, we get an image of him granting the widow justice so she won't "assault" him or "give [him] a black eye." Still doesn't seem like something worthy of fear when the widow is clearly, on almost all accounts, the powerless one in the story. Perhaps embarrassment and shame are the true motivators here. According to one commentator, the widow "acts completely inappropriately. She isn't even supposed to **speak** in court, and yet she does, over and over again. In doing so she embarrasses herself, but she also embarrasses everyone else, including the judge... So this woman with no bargaining power, no way to appeal to a higher authority, no advocate, and no reason to hope in her case is willing to step into the extremely uncomfortable place of hopeless and socially inappropriate protest to this judge over and over again, and it's her willingness to embarrass herself and persevere that eventually convinces the judge to grant her justice." She was surely called all kinds of names by those feeling the sting of this widely cast circle of embarrassment.

Oh Jacob. Clever, crafty, conniving Jacob. For all his go-getter spunk, he sure seems to be holding back in a place of fear and cowardice. Just before our passage he prays: *Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children*. Yet, already having acknowledged the danger of it, he sends his wives and children and the whole rest of his company across the stream ahead of him, creating a nice wide buffer, of physical space and other people, between himself and his brother.

We won't even go into the long list of names Jacob may have been called over the course of his life. Lying there alone, staring up at the vast night sky, I'm sure facing his cowardice was enough of a weight to keep his mind racing that night.

I'm sure at one point or another, we've all been there, staring up into the darkness while our minds race to escape the names that wound. The names that stick. Maybe it's woundings that have been passed down for generations. Maybe it's the wounds of names we've been called, or have called ourselves.

Suddenly pulled away physically from that internal struggle, Jacob hits the ground hard. He finds himself entangled in a mess of arms, legs, muscle. As the shock slowly subsides he begins to move more intentionally. Beginning to anticipate, to resist some of the moves of his opponent. He reaches out to grapple with this strange other, and though they are intimately close, covered in each other's sweat and the same dirt, Jacob still does not know the identity of his mysterious opponent.

As they near daybreak, Jacob's previous cowardice has been replaced by daring strength. Even as Jacob begins to uncover that God is the one with whom he has been tirelessly wrestling, he holds on and refuses to let go. As the day begins to break, Jacob's wrestling opponent asks to be released. With God as the opponent, it is clear that this is for Jacob's sake; as we know from

elsewhere in scripture no one can see the face of God and live. Yet Jacob won't relent; exhausted and breathless, he holds on still. Although fearing death is what brings him to this place alone, wrestling with God in the dark of the night, he is willing to risk death for the sake of receiving a divine blessing.

How long has the widow been holding on in her wrestling match? We know that cries for justice can be ignored for a long time when there is no fear of God nor respect for people, so who knows how long this widow has been pleading her case. We don't know the specific tactics, other than her undying persistence, but to rid himself of such an annoying and embarrassing inconvenience, the judge grants the request, if only to get her out of his hair.

As the parable explains itself, it is on one level about an argument from the lesser to the greater. If even this ridiculous unjust judge grants this persistently offered request, how much more willing is a loving God to listen to those who cry out in prayer day and night? People have all sorts of reasons for softening or even avoiding prayer, some perhaps more justified than others. It may be that we don't cry out to God because we fear if we do there will be no response and we will lose faith. However, if we don't cry out at all, haven't we already lost that faith?

If we look at the parable itself, and momentarily set aside the explanation surrounding it, there is another layer of instruction when the script gets flipped. When we read ourselves alongside the judge, we hear God, who is closer in character to the widow than the judge, pleading with us to hear the cries of the oppressed, and not just once we get to the point that we're inconvenienced by them.

Holding both layers together urges us in the two-way direction of prophetic speech. We plead with God on behalf of the people and we urge the people (including ourselves) to repent for the ways we align ourselves with unjust judges.

After yet another black life was stolen when Atatiana Jefferson was murdered in her own home last Saturday, the demand to cry out becomes clear all over again. The persistent widow, and all those who do the work, and have been doing the work, call us to join them in their wrestling, striving, persisting and calling out. For so many, they persist in this work because, like with the widow, it is a matter of life and death. For many of us, we can choose each day if we will join in the work or not, because our privilege and our whiteness (for those of us in those boats) keeps us safe. And many of us do make the choice in each of our lives individually to join and strive for justice in this work. So we need to bring that persisting energy to turn the note of our protest sign in our front yard into a symphony of collective action.

The persisting and the wrestling of these stories show us that the journey of our salvation may not always be as slow and gentle as we might hope. We'd much rather progress slowly, seeing each next step and deciding we're ok with it before taking it. But sometimes, like Jacob, we get knocked down flat on our backs.

Another commentary quotes James Newsome, who suggests that, "even in the midst of our struggles with God and with self, the most enduring word is a word of God's grace," and he describes grace in the "ultimate irony" that "being confronted with the mirror that God held before beleaguered Jacob, a mirror that reflected a flawed and sinful Jacob, Jacob saw also Peniel, the face of God."

For those calling out all day and night like the widow, or those wrestling all night long like Jacob, our God *who KEEPS* you will not *slumber nor sleep*. What grace to be kept by an everlasting God in a disposable world.

As we are called to the Table, we're called to leave behind some things. First, let us lay down all

those names that wound, whether inflicted by others or ourselves. Then let us cast off any excuses we construct for delaying justice. Standing taller and lighter, we have room to be fed. May we go forth then as those who bear the name of Christ, pestering and persisting in all our dirt-smudged, bruised-hip glory.