

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Gen.32:22-31 Ps. 121 Tim. 3:14-4:5 Lk. 18:1-8

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Oct. 19, 2025

I read something I found surprising and somewhat unsettling this past week written by one of my favorite spiritual teachers, Kathleen Norris. She writes, *“For grace to be grace, it must give us things we didn’t know we needed and take us to places we didn’t want to go”... “For grace to be grace, it must give us things we didn’t know we needed and take us to places we didn’t want to go.”*

Her words surprised and unsettled me because I had always thought of grace as being... gentle... a resting place of sorts... a space that could hold whatever I was carrying by way of angst and regret, trusting that grace could hold it, and in time, with great love, and without too much disruption to my well-made plans and my sense of self, make some minor adjustments in me for the better...

Never had I thought of “grace” giving me things I didn’t know I needed and taking me places I didn’t want to go... both of which make grace sound more tumultuous than tranquil... more like a sparring partner than a sweet and gentle friend...

For the most part, I think many of us have been taught to approach our Gospel text for this morning in the same way I have tended to approach the word “grace”... That is, expecting to see

something like the image Lutherans always have on their bulletin covers when this Gospel text comes around every third year... which is a photo of a sweet old woman with her head bowed and her hands folded in prayer, with the accompanying by-line, “pray always.”

Which is a perfectly fine way of interpreting the central meaning of the story presented in this morning’s Gospel text... After all, the passage begins with the line, “Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart”... And it follows on the heels of some dire warnings from Jesus about the coming of the end times... Frightening predictions that might very well have warranted some extra prayer and strengthening of heart for his disciples...

Meaning the “traditional” explanation of the parable as a directive to pray always, with its example of the widow who harangues the judge until he finally responds and gives her what she wants, and by extension inviting us to do the same, is not a “bad” explanation... **It’s just not what Luke most wanted to say when he included the parable in his Gospel...**

Which is why I’m so grateful that we have a prodigious amount of milkweed pods in our little corner of the world at the moment as a way of trying to get at what Luke was intending when he included this parable in his Gospel, and along with the milkweed pods a poem by Richard Wilbur entitled “A Milkweed”... a poem that begins with these four lines:

*Anonymous as cherubs*

*Over the crib of God,*

*White seeds are floating*

*Out of my burst pod..."*

Four lines followed by the milkweed itself acknowledging that it had no power before it broke open and learned to yield, and thus beseeching,

*Shatter me, great wind;*

*I shall possess the field."*

The thing is, the story Jesus tells his disciples about the widow and the judge is a parable... And parables aren't intended to be easily "explained," reduced to bumper sticker slogans like "pray always," or depicted in photos on bulletin covers that provide worshippers with sweet warm feelings... Rather, they are intended to pull the rug out from underneath their readers, and to leave them wondering, arguing, struggling, wrestling, limping, limping, limping, and finally falling, falling, falling into...

Which is why perhaps, we might consider the parable from another angle, as suggested by pastor and New Testament professor Audrey West, who points out that the *"sphere of any widow's influence in Jesus' day was normally the private sphere of the home, not the public sphere of power and social influence. However,"* as Audrey West writes, *"the widow in this parable challenges the status quo, upending any social convention that would keep her in her place. She breaks through the boundaries that divide public and private, taking her case from her marginalized position into the very center of power..."*

All the way to the judge, where she bothers him until she "wears him out," as the parable tells us, the Greek word *hypopiazo*, translated

here as “wearing out,” coming from the arena of boxing, translated literally as, “to hit under the eye.”

*“Meaning,” says Audrey West, “that the widow brings about a change in the judge by her unrelenting pursuit of justice.”* In other words, she gives him the old “one-two.” She says, “Put up your dukes you old sack of a judge, so stuck are you in your own world, your own needs, your own ways and perspectives, your own closed-up milkweed pod, you can’t even remember the glorious vision of universal shalom and well-being that has formed the essence of God’s being from the beginning.”

*“The widow in this parable,” says Audrey West, “is a lot like God, who, relentless in coming, persists in crossing every boundary, and challenging every narrow viewpoint, every form of bondage that would keep us from opening our eyes and hearts (our pods) to a vision every bit as wise as God’s...”*

*“The widow is a lot like God, who comes as something as unlikely as a vulnerable child to bring down the powerful from their thrones, and to reveal a power made perfect in love; something we can’t see without a few ‘one-two’s’ to the walls and defenses of our own making...”*

Do you see the difference in these two perspectives on the parable? In one, there is the very helpful if not important directive to “pray always.” But in the other there is something excruciatingly beautiful by way of a warning... a warning about the God of love who will do battle with every boundary and every system that threatens to maintain the definitions of in and out, clean and unclean, sacred and profane, saved and unsaved, worthy and unworthy, loved and unloved, claiming it all as Love’s own...

One perspective on the parable leaves us intact. In control. And the other leaves us undone, because it takes away the narrow perspectives and antique assumptions upon which we build our lives. It suggests that in the parable, God is the persistent widow, and we are the ones who need waking up...

And it leaves us limping. Limping... until by the grace of God we fall into the possibility of a new way of seeing and being and knowing and living and dying and rising... Giving us something we didn't know we needed and taking us places we maybe didn't want to go...

Which is exactly what happened to Jacob in this morning's text from Genesis, one of the most wonderful stories in all of the Bible about what happened to a terrified Jacob the night before he was to meet his bother Esau after years and years of animosity between them due to Jacob's swindling of the family birthright from Esau...

It's a story whose depth we don't have time to plumb right now, except to say that Jacob came to the Ford of the Jabbok that night intact, with the name of Jacob, and left the next morning limping, with the new name of Israel, all because a man who Jacob later named as God accosted him in the same manner as the widow accosted the judge in our Gospel text...

In other words, with the intention of wrestling Jacob into a new way of seeing that was not dictated by the sins of his past or the fears of the present... limitations that had been shaped for ever so long by jealousy, parental favoritism, guilt and insecurity... Limitations so deadly that once Jacob glimpsed the possibility of something "other" in the presence of his assailant, he clung to it as if his life depended upon it, because it did... Saying to the One who removed his hip from its socket

and his heart from its tomb, “I will not let you go until you have blessed me.”

Reminding me that the French word for “wound” is “*blessure*,” which has the same root as the word “blessing.” ... Reminding me as well that once, long ago, when I was working through a difficulty in my life with a counselor, he said, “Don’t let this dis-ease go until it has blessed you...”

Which isn’t so different perhaps, from Kathleen Norris’s surprising and unsettling word of wisdom, “*For grace to be grace, it must give us things we didn’t know we needed and take us to places we didn’t want to go.*”

Which isn’t so different perhaps, from Richard Wilbur’s milkweed, who first says,

*Anonymous as cherubs*

*Over the crib of God,*

*White seeds are floating*

*Out of my burst pod...*

Pleading then,

*“Shatter me, great wind;*

*I shall possess the field.”*

Please do not hear me say that our Gospel text for this morning is not an invitation for us to bring everything to God in prayer; even to put

up our dukes and give God the old “one-two”... Because it is... It is such an invitation... But I think it’s also fair warning to say that God is doing the same to us... Giving new meaning to that old picture many of us may have had in our Sunday School classrooms of a gentle-looking-fair haired-blue-eyed Jesus knocking on a lovely wooden door framed by roses... “The door of our hearts,” as my Sunday School teacher used to tell us....

Yes, Jesus is knocking on our door, even as we bring our most fervent prayers to God... And Jesus is holding our pain, our sorrows, our fears and regrets... But by the power of love, he is also determined to break us out of our tightly-closed pods so we might become cherubs over the crib of God... scattered by the wild windy spirit of God to bear God’s justice and God’s love to the world... Freed from the things that hold us in bondage so we might become our fullest and most authentic selves for the sake of God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven...

I’m not sure this is exactly what the writers of our texts had in mind when they told their stories about prayer being a wrestling match with God in which God may very well be trying to give us what we don’t necessarily want and taking us places we may not necessarily want to go...

But I will share with you that since Michael’s death in July, as I’ve brought my sorrow, and grief and anger to God in prayer through writing and walking and my morning quiet time, there has sometimes come to me what has felt to be a bit of a breaking open of the seed pod of my closed heart... a breaking open that has in turn opened me to a few new ways of seeing and being, including...

- a greater willingness to let tears flow, even in the presence of others...
- a deeper feeling of kinship with and compassion towards those who are suffering from loss or grief or anxiety over the future...
- a fuller appreciation of this season of the year and all it has to teach me about the cycles of life and death and the necessity of letting go...
- a more attentive “attunement” to signs around me that reveal Michael’s presence with me even now, and with glimpses of his presence glimpses also of that heaven about which we have heard, where, as poet Wendell Berry writes, *“those who love each other have forgiven each other/ and where for that the leaves are green/ the light a music in the air/ and all is unentangled/ and all is undismayed...”*

And at times it has felt like grace...Not always... But at times I have recognized how the words “blessing” and “wound” could share a linguistic root... and I have begun to understand what my old counselor meant when he said, “Don’t let this dis-ease, this grief, this sorrow go until it has blessed you”...

Don’t get me wrong... I am not saying Michael’s death was a blessing. Nor am I saying Michael’s death was God’s “doing” for the sake of giving me what I didn’t know I needed or taking me places I didn’t want to go...

But I am saying that when life happens... both the devastations and the elations of it... when we think to take any of it to God in prayer (however we understand that word), we can be assured that

Love's presence (aka God) will wrestle with us with as much determination as the stranger at the Ford of the Jabbok and as the widow at the judge's door... Because that's what Love does...

Love's presence wrestles with us until we are blessed... until the seed pods of our lives are broken open and we find ourselves limping, limping, limping... falling, falling, falling into the arms of Love... into the grace that knows just what we need and just where we need to go in order to be the fullest measure of ourselves God longs for us to be...

May it be for each of us, dear siblings in Christ... All of us a bunch of limping lovers, refusing to let go of the very same God who refuses to let go of us, until by such holding-on we are all blessed... little glimpses of God's fierce and tender love, our seeds floating, anonymous as cherubs, over the crib of God...