

TEXT: Lectionary  
THEME: God desires justice  
SUBJECT: Persistent striving  
TITLE: Vulnerability

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Three vignettes of vulnerability. A widow in first century Palestine was the incarnation of vulnerability. The widow in our story is poor, apparently without a son, or even a male protector, and as close to a non-person as anyone could be.

Although deprived of the support of a husband, she could not inherit her husband's estate, which passed on to the deceased man's sons or brothers, so disputes involving widows and orphans was common. Women could not appear in court. Judges adjudicated cases without benefit of jury.

The judge does not fear God and does not respect any other human being. Every story, every word in Luke's gospel, is commentary on the two great commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. This judge loves only himself. As the widow is the incarnation of vulnerability, the judge is the incarnation of narcissism.

The English translation waters down the sharp irony of the Greek text. Verse 5 really means something like: "for fear she will give me a black eye by her constant coming." A term from boxing is used, an ironic application to a poor woman confronting a powerful man. The judge's statement should be read, not as an expression of genuine fear, but as a cynical joke quite in keeping with his character. He only wants to be left alone.

*The widow is an oppressed person who refuses to collude in her own oppression.* Instead, she engages in "shameless" behavior, crossing forbidden social and gender boundaries to obtain a just verdict. It is her dishonorable behavior that produces justice. Shameless persistence is the weapon of the weak, the hope of those who firmly believe that God will vindicate them.

If we are offended by the tactics of "Black Lives Matter," we probably don't know what it means to stand for years knocking at a locked door, knuckles bleeding, watching our children suffer the deprivations of poverty, a poverty sustained by impenetrable systems of oppression maintained by "respectable" society.

Our second vignette of vulnerability involves a young pastor, a congregation who wants to have its ears tickled, who will not tolerate sound teaching, who will accumulate teachers more attuned to their desires, and an imprisoned apostle fighting for the future of the church. Apparently Timothy is more concerned with retiring with full benefits, with not jeopardizing his pension plan, than with faithfully proclaiming the gospel.

If Timothy is feeling vulnerable because of the judgment of the congregation, Paul reminds him of the judgment of God. As persistent as the widow was in pursuing justice, Timothy is to

persist in proclaiming the gospel whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Tell the truth no matter what.

Whether the time is favorable or unfavorable depends on where you stand in the social order. From a jail cell in Birmingham, Martin Luther King wrote, "I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard 'Wait!' 'Wait' almost always means never."

Our third vignette of vulnerability is the story of twin brothers, the younger of whom stole the older brother's birthright. Think inheritance. Twenty years have passed. Now a middle-aged man with four wives and eleven kids, Jacob is traveling south to face Esau who is traveling north to meet him. He doesn't know how Esau will receive him. So Jacob bravely sends his wives and children across the river, while he remains behind.

The Hebrew text, according to professor Avivah Zornberg, indicates that the night fell unexpectedly. The sun set before its proper time. Jacob "collides" with a place - and suddenly, before he knows it, the place has taken him over.

This place, according to Hebrew tradition, is the place where Jacob's father, Isaac, was bound and offered up by Abraham. This is no ordinary place. This is the place of striving with divine and human beings. This striving often occurs in the "night."

Walter Brueggemann notes, "We have our worst nightmares when the daytime is very troubling to us. At night, our defenses are down, and we lose the initiative for our existence that we can maintain all day long, when our guard is up."

In the night Jacob wrestles with . . . his conscience? his fear of his brother? an unfathomable Other? All three? In any case, Jacob prevails and receives a blessing. Blessing, however, comes with a side of wounding. Jacob limps for the rest of his life.

If we think we can be blessed without being wounded, we have been taught by teachers attuned to our desires.

Jacob wants to know the name of the divine being and is brushed off. He's not going to know the name. The vulnerability we can never escape is the vulnerability of not knowing. Maggie Ross tells us, "The unknowability of God, our selves, and our neighbors, is the same unknowability, and in this unknowability is the most profound engagement."

To wrestle, as the rabbi's taught, is to embrace. It's a very intimate bodily encounter, legs around legs, and arms around arms, intertwined. It is a most profound engagement. Jacob begins his struggle with an adversary and ends in the embrace of a lover.