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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/16/2016, The 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 29
Genesis 32:22-31, 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5, Luke 18:1-8
Stubbornness

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I believe I see a theme uniting our three Bible readings for this Sunday. What these readings have in common is the call to persevere. We are to be a stubborn people – not stubborn in all things, naturally, but stubborn in things concerning our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are not to be knocked off our beam and thereby driven away from our faith. We are not to be blown off course. If we need to wrestle with the Lord in prayer, then wrestle on! If we need to go our own way in relationship to the world around us, then let us march on in our own way! The winds on the sea can shove the sailing ship around, yet it is possible to wrestle the rudder back under control, to adjust the sails, to recalculate the heading, and to start moving again in the right direction. The storm might disrupt us for a while, but when it comes to our loyalty to Jesus Christ, we should be a stubborn people. We should keep adjusting things and drifting back toward him, like a compass needle drifting back toward true north. The storms of life — sickness, poverty, grief, disappointment, doubts – such tempests might set us back or confuse us for a while in our discipleship, but today’s Bible stories ask us to hang in there. We are to persevere, to persist, to adjust, to keep running back to Jesus as quickly as we can. Keep knocking on heaven’s door. Keep close to Jesus, and if we should stray for a while, turn and come back to him, for he will in no wise cast us out (John 6:37).

So our general theme is that we are to persevere. We are to be a stubborn people. In fact, the world should be a bit perplexed by us, as if there is no sure handle on us – no sure way of predicting what we will do or believe or care about. And that’s because our inner sense of direction is not to be so much determined by popular culture, but simply by our attempts to be true to Jesus. Many a tree can stand upright when it is sheltered in the midst of a forest, but it takes a strong tree, deeply rooted, to withstand the winds of this world when it stands alone there in the middle of the meadow. That is what Christians are to be like: we are to be like some old oak tree – with winds of disappointment, doubt, and temptation swirling all around us – but here we stand! We persevere in following Jesus. It’s the most solid thing about us. We mean to stick with Jesus no matter what.

Well, let’s turn to the Bible stories to see what I mean. The general theme is perseverance. But that theme splits in two depending on whether we are talking about persevering with God or with our neighbors. When it comes to

God, we are to persevere in prayer. We are to be a stubborn people, wrestling with God if need be, claiming the promises of God, and never giving up on them. But when we are speaking of our relationship to our neighbors, we are to be a “peculiar people.” We are to be a people who make no final sense *until* Jesus is taken into account.

That phrase I just used – that we are to be a “peculiar people” – that phrase comes from St. Paul’s letter to Titus. The apostle is talking about the purpose for which Jesus saved us – he saved us that we might be a new kind of people in this world:

Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself *a peculiar people*, zealous of good works. (Titus 2:14, KJV)

We are to be an odd, but holy people, but in our oddness, we are also to be a blessing for our neighbors, for we are to be “zealous of good works.” In the end, then, our stubbornness in standing up for Jesus will prove to be, not a burden on our world, but a blessing for our world – one of the truest of blessings.

Let’s begin with stubbornness in relation to the world – not in relation to God, but to a world that does not always follow the Lord. This morning’s Second Lesson states the stubbornness to which we are called. St. Paul is writing to his younger colleague Timothy and he speaks of being “persistent”:

¹In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; *be persistent* whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. (2 Timothy 4:1-2, RSV)

“...be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.” St. Paul is talking about proclaiming the gospel. He is talking to a preacher. Timothy is to preach the apostolic gospel in season and out of season, when it is popular and when it is unpopular, when it is welcome and when it is unwanted, when it is all the rage and when it is detested, when it is fashionable and when it is dismissed as old-fashioned. Like a ship plowing through the winds, Timothy is to press on with his preaching, undeterred by countervailing forces. He is to “be persistent.” Winds! like a ship plowing through the winds. Timothy is not to be buffeted off course by the winds of fashion. In St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the apostle speaks of the Christian duty and destiny for maturity, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” He puts the matter this way:

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about *by every wind of doctrine...* (Ephesians 4:14, NRSV)

When Jesus questioned the crowds as to what they expected to see when they went to see John the Baptist, he asked them whether they expected to see someone “shaken by the wind”:

Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John:
“What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken *by the wind?*” (Matthew 11:7, RSV)

Reeds are like that. They can be shaken by the wind, tossed to and fro and blown about by the winds. But you, Christian, are not to be so. When St. Paul asks for a kind of holy stubbornness in Timothy, he means not just Timothy, but each of us too. We are not to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.

Current winds of doctrine, for example, think little of solemn vows. I know someone who promised me right to my face that he or she was reaffirming the solemn vows of Baptism:

- P** Do you this day, in the presence of God and of this Christian congregation, confirm the solemn covenant which at your Baptism you made with the Triune God?
- R** **I do.**

But I see no evidence that that person meant it, disappearing the next Sunday.... until later, when that some person made the solemn vow to raise a newborn child in the faith of the church – a promise made to Jesus Christ “who is to judge the living and the dead.” And like a fool I believed the words. But again: no follow-through, at least not here at our church where the vow was made. I fear that it was just a matter of words. Just words. But those are the winds of current doctrine. They do not take words seriously.

When Fr. Richard John Neuhaus was asked how it was that priests could abuse children and young men in their congregations, Fr. Neuhaus gave what I think is the perfect answer: They could do it because they no longer believed in the “worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched” (Mark 9:44). They took their solemn vows of ordination, but they were just words. Just words.

Likewise, husbands and wives are being cast aside because, at least in some cases, someone did not really care about the solemn vow “to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.” The modern winds of doctrine would toss us to and fro concerning vows, but St. Paul would have Timothy and

would have you and me stand strong in the midst of those winds. Stand strong with a holy stubbornness. Let the winds of modern doctrine blow howsoever they will, when the world meets you, the world is to meet a man of his word, a woman of her word! The world is to meet a solid old oak tree in you, in me.

In a way, the second theme about perseverance also concerns words, just words. Christians are to persevere in prayer. They are to wrestle with God. They are to express in unmistakable fashion that they take the Lord *at his word!* They refuse to believe that when God says, I love you, he is simply speaking words, just words.

So Jacob wrestles with the Lord at the river Jabbok. The man will not let the Lord go, even though the Lord cripples him:

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."
(Genesis 32:26, RSV)

How *can* Jacob let the Lord go? Jacob knows that the Lord has promised to bless Israel and all the world through the descendants of Abraham, and he is such a one. Jacob might be a sinner, but he is a sinner through whom the Lord has made promises, and Jacob does not intend to let the Lord back out of his promise. So, he wrestles with the Lord. Good for him!

It is akin to the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman – the woman he called a dog. She hangs in there. She has heard that Jesus is a good man, with the ability to do miracles. She wants one for her daughter, so she wrestles with Jesus until she wins the victory. She does not wilt and go away when he likens her to a dog. Instead she answers back with an answer that thrills Jesus:

²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.
(Matthew 15:27-28, RSV)

Onlookers might have thought her a stubborn woman. But Jesus is delighted by her. If she be stubborn, it is with a sacred stubbornness. If she be dogged, it is with a holy doggedness.

Likewise with this morning's Gospel story about the persistent widow. She keeps knocking on the door until the judge at last agrees to hear her case. He can't sleep. Night and day she is calling to him to vindicate her against her adversary. So, he does. He does, not because he is a good man, but because she will not give up. She will not let him have peace and quiet. She believes in justice and requires him to believe in it too. This is one of the few parables in

the Bible in which Jesus tells us the moral of the parable before he even tells the story. What Jesus would have us learn goes this way:

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought *always* to pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1, RSV)

This is the formula for persistence in prayer: always pray, and do not lose heart. If the unjust judge can grant prayer, so can Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, who loves us in an overwhelming way. So, do not give up. Continue in prayer. Be stubborn about it.

I close with this point: There are many good things we can say about our Lord Jesus. One of them is that he was stubborn. He had grit in his soul. When Pharisees came to warn Jesus that Herod meant to kill him, Jesus continued on his path, undeterred:

³²And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following..."(Luke 13:32-33, RSV)

Let our stubbornness be similar. Jesus had good work to do, and he would not be swayed from it by anything. You and I have good work before us too. Let us stubbornly do that good work to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of his name, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.