

Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2022
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
“Give Us a Blessing”
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Decorah, Iowa

Every night, Brian Wallach sends a few words of persistent hope into the world through his Twitter account. One week ago, he wrote: *In 11 hours I turn 42. Not today ALS. Definitely not today.*

Brian is the epitome of turning your pain into your purpose. On the website dedicated to his film project, “No Ordinary Campaign”, the film is described as *a feature documentary about action born from hope*. It is presented with this introduction: *At 37, Brian Wallach was diagnosed with ALS—on the same day he and his wife Sandra brought their youngest daughter home from the hospital. A broken system offered no hope for a cure. So, Brian and Sandra have set out to forge their own path. This is a documentary unfolding in real-time as one couple fights for their own future while seeking to build a brighter one for thousands of others.*

How do we respond when a broken system offers no hope for a cure?

In Uvalde, Texas, Brett Cross camped outside the school district offices for 10 days, often joined by other Uvalde families, calling for justice. Cross was quoted as saying, *“I am asking ... get these officers off of these campuses until it is proved whether or not they were justified in sitting outside of the classroom for 77 minutes.”* One writer described the sit-out with these words: *“Uvalde families have exemplified the power of activism, unity and tenacity as their protest has led to the suspension of the Uvalde school district police force.”* One day after the sit-out ended, Cross persisted in working for justice, working at an event in the Uvalde Square getting folks registered to vote.

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We don’t know the details of the unnamed widow’s case in the parable Jesus tells. The parable itself is limited to four sparse verses. We don’t know who her opponent is. We don’t know what the justice she’s persistently pleading for looks like. We might think we know something about her, given that she is a biblical widow, but to describe her as powerless, destitute, without connection or support in the community would be to stereotype her. And, as the parable demonstrates, this widow, this woman, is indeed powerful.

The English translation obscures the literal meaning when it translates the judge’s words as *I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming*. The words translated as *wear me out* are more of a boxing term. *I will grant her justice, so that she may not jab me repeatedly in the eye*. Far from being powerless, the widow is a threat to the judge. And in the

end, she changes him. Though he has no respect for people and doesn't even fear God, the judge responds to the widow's powerful persistence and grants her justice.

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The gospel writer wraps this messy parable up in a tidy package, explaining its meaning to us before Jesus even starts speaking: *Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*

Is it really that simple?

What happens when we pray always, crying out to God day and night, and God doesn't answer? Is not losing heart a matter of willpower? If we just try hard enough can we prevent giving ourselves over to despair? I don't know about you, but that's certainly not my experience. And that's why I love our first reading for this day so much.

Jacob is a mess. He stole his brother's birthright and fled. Taken in by his uncle Laban, the tables are turned and Jacob becomes the victim of his uncle's scheming. Now, twenty-some years later, Jacob's about to meet his brother Esau again, the one he has so terribly wronged. And he is rightfully scared. How will Esau respond to Jacob's homecoming?

The wrestling that I have to believe was taking place inside Jacob's mind becomes an embodied experience on the banks of the Jabbok. Through the night, Jacob wrestles with what turns out to be the very presence of God. Jacob doesn't let go of God. And God doesn't let go of him. They wrestle through the night; they wrestle for as long as it takes; they wrestle until daybreak. And Jacob is wounded in that wrestling. That limp will be with him the rest of his days. But he is also blessed in that wrestling. Indeed, Jacob demands a blessing from God.

I will never forget working with a group of confirmation students as they re-enacted this scene. The student playing the part of Jacob really embraced his role. When the time came, he cried out with the loudest, most sincere, knowing-in-his-own-experience-the-pain-of-Jacob voice—*Give me a blessing!* It was a demand born of grief and pain, but even more so ... born of hope.

Though we are wrestling, God is still here. I am not alone. I am not abandoned to my own worst self. There is still hope. I can't see it now, but I still long to see it. God is faithful, even to me. Even in the midst of this mess. Even in the face of such profound sorrow. Even though I've been changed, I've been wounded, I'll be limping for the rest of my life. God, give me a blessing!

And God gives Jacob a blessing, changing his name to Israel which means, *He struggles with God*. This is our heritage. And in some strange and wondrous way, this is our blessing. We struggle with God. Wrestling with God is not only acceptable, it is core to who we are.

How do we respond when a broken system offers no hope for a cure? We wrestle with God. We express our anger, our lament, our bone-deep weariness. We express our fear that change will never come. We look to God through our rage and our tears, and cry out to God to bless this world God so loves. *Give us a blessing!*

How does God respond when a broken system offers no hope for a cure? *The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.* Jesus moved into the neighborhood. He was lauded and rejected. He was seen as a savior and as a threat. He wrestled with God on the night in which he was betrayed. He prayed, *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.*

This is the one in whose name we pray. This is the one who knows firsthand our sorrows and our suffering. This is the one who wrestled through the night to bless the whole world. And when daybreak came, his grave was empty and death, in every vile form it takes, was defeated forever.

Not today ALS. Not today gun violence. Not today systemic racism. Not today political corruption. Not today COVID. Not today hate. Not today death. Not today.

How does God respond when a broken system offers no hope for a cure? *The Lord will preserve you from all evil and will keep your life.*

How do we respond, held in this promise, when a broken system offers no hope for a cure? Not by our own willpower, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, we persist.

United with Christ in the waters of baptism, fed and strengthened for the journey at his table, we join Jesus in wrestling out of death a blessing of abundant life for the world.