

Lord, make these words Your Word, that our hearts may become Your heart. Amen.

I once heard a very sad story from a friend who worked as a high school counselor. A young man was arrested for dealing drugs at school, just the most serious

In a long line of behaviors guaranteed to get him in trouble.

He was an only child, his mother was a high-level executive, divorced, with a

high-powered job in the city, and he spent most of his time after school alone.

When they finally reached his mother, and tried to talk to her about making

some changes for his sake, she was highly defensive and basically said,

“Look, my job is to make enough money to make sure he has everything he wants – and to pay for therapy if he needs it. It’s not my job to spend time with him.”

That’s about the saddest statement about parenting I’ve ever heard.

Pretty much the whole job is to spend time with our children –

until they tell us they don’t want to spend time with us.

When we love someone, what we want most is time with them.

From what we learn about God as we read the bible – God is no different.

Hey, maybe we got it from God!

God is Love. God’s nature is love. God cannot but love, even the most unlovable.

Like anyone who loves, God wants more time with us – even when we’re whining.

Many times I hear people say they don’t want to pray about something because

they don’t want to “bother God about that,” as though God’s attention is limited.

I think God would like it if we bothered God a whole lot more, about everything.

Just as we want our children to let us know what they want even if they can’t

have it, even if they’re whining. Silence is way worse than whining.

Somehow, many churches have managed to give us the impression that:

- God doesn’t want to be bothered.
- God just wants us to be good.
- Struggling with God is bad.

Today’s readings remind us that such assumptions about God are wrong.

Jesus’ parable about this persistent widow is just one reminder that

God invites us to “bother” him, to make our needs known.

Not so we can get exactly “what we want,” but so we can be real and honest in relationship – and then sometimes we find out that what we thought we needed gets shaped by what God wants for us.

Is there something you’ve been afraid to pester God about? Go for it! Be open. Is there something you’ve stopped praying about because you saw no response and gradually shut down, just going through the motions? Dare to open up.

How about the notion that God just pays attention to us if we’re “good?” God doesn’t want us to be good as much as God wants us to be real, and close.

In fact, being close to God is how we become good.

If you don’t believe me, look at the stories about pretty much every person God ever chose to work through in the bible.

Jacob was no shining moral example – he cheated his brother out of his birthright, cheated his father out of a blessing, cheated his uncle out of flocks of goats.

He was also a hard worker, a devoted husband – to several wives and concubines. AND he was one who loved God and sought to worship God. We can be both. And God showed up in his life more than once. He was a chosen one.

The story we heard today is an odd story of struggle with God, with mystical elements – who is that masked man who wrestles with Jacob? It’s only at the end of the story that we learn this is a divine being.

Jacob has been struggling his whole life, but here, at this crisis point when he is returning home and fearful that his brother still wants to kill him, he has this encounter with the living God, that leaves him both blessed and wounded.

This is also the foundation story for Israel’s chosenness going forward, for God changes Jacob’s name to Israel: one who prevails with God.

The twelve tribes of Israel are named for Jacob’s sons.

Jacob will walk with that limp the rest of his days – and he will walk with God’s blessing, one thing he could not steal.

I believe God would much rather we struggled with him than ignored him. Sometimes we feel the effects of that struggle – any saint will tell you that. As with all relationships, it’s not all sweetness and light.

Yet if we don’t bring our disappointments and anger to God, if we don’t occasionally raise our fists toward heaven and say, “How could you let this injustice go on?” we’re shutting God out of the reality of our lives.

A story is told of Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun in the middle ages. She was a mystic, and a theologian – the first woman to be deemed a “Doctor of the Church.”

It is said that one day she was riding through a rainstorm very much like we're having today, when her carriage hit a rock and toppled over, spilling her and all its contents into the mud. As she picked herself up, she shook her fist skyward and said, "If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them!"

The life of God is not always easy – that's why we need faith.

If anyone told you the spiritual life meant to be calm and peaceful, you were sold a bill of goods. The deeper we go into relationship with God, the more we let our hearts be broken by the pain and injustice of the world, the more we wrestle. But often, very often, that wrestling leads to blessing.

It was in the midst of a great trial and worry that I first received the instruction: Expect blessing! My cat had just been diagnosed with diabetes and a month later gone into heart failure – I was waiting for an appointment with the vet, and praying like crazy, "Please God, please Jesus, please God."

I went to work to kill the time, and as I walked down the stairs at my church this thought came into my mind: Expect blessing. Huh? Expect blessing. And I remembered, "Oh yeah, we worship a God of power and love! Our God is in the business of blessing. Expect blessing!"

We don't get to dictate where the blessing will come – it may be in some area other than where we're praying, but expect that in every day there will be blessing, and often in the very place we most need it. Often – not always. That day I found it in having exactly the right amount of time while the cat was being examined to get my car inspected before the deadline that night; minor, but the timing felt like blessing. The greater blessing was that my cat's conditions were treatable and she lived another few years with me. The greatest blessing was that it transformed the way I pray, and the way my sister prays, and the people we both taught it to. Not enough time to do what you need to do? Expect blessing. Challenging medical news? Expect blessing. Bell tower crumbling? Expect blessing. It's how we get closer to God.

What's asked of us is less jumping to conclusions, and more leaps of faith. God has chosen us. God wants to bless our socks off. We are invited on a journey that we can't control, that might leave us limping. And blessed beyond our wildest dreams.
Amen.

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Genesis 32:22-31

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.