

Church of the Crossroads  
Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 21, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

FACE TO FACE

Genesis 32:22–31  
Psalm 121  
Luke 18:1–8

Today, by way of this sermon, I would like to celebrate the gift of human authenticity, We all have a potential for such authenticity, and when it is realized, it truly is a gift to celebrate.

There are two stories from this morning's readings that celebrate human authenticity, The first of these is the little parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, The Gospel writer Luke frames the parable in a certain way, He uses it to illustrate the need to pray always, and not to give up, If that unjust judge will grant the widow justice, can we not imagine how much more God will grant the requests we voice in our prayers?

I'm not sure, however, that Jesus had prayer on his mind when he told the story, It is, after all, a story about the need to be persistent when it comes to justice, Here is a widow seeking justice from an unjust judge, William Herzog, in his book *Parables as Subversive Speech*, as usual, is helpful.<sup>1</sup> Herzog says that the widow represents all who are poor and oppressed, The Torah (Jewish law) recognizes the vulnerability of the widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land, and seeks to protect them from the designs of the wealthy and powerful, In light of Jewish society, the widow is vulnerable; in light of the Torah, she has a favored status, The court she goes to is a religious court, and the judge of that court is supposed to uphold the requirements of Jewish law, Those requirements gave a widow certain rights, especially the right to receive moneys from her dead husband's inheritance so that her basic needs could be met, For some reason, perhaps the greed of family members, this widow is being denied what she justly deserves, The judge, however, is corrupt, Although he is charged with the responsibility to uphold the requirements of the Torah, he neither fears God

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 12, Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*. Louisville: KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

nor respects people, He is probably “on the take,” and is in cahoots with the widow’s opponents,

A widow usually would not come to the court in person, She would have a family member represent her, But not this widow, She defies social convention and marches right into the court herself so that she can come face to face with the unjust judge and seek justice, She will not be silenced, She will not give up her authenticity as a human being, As for the judge, he will grant her justice, simply because he doesn’t want to be worn out by her constant coming (or, as the Greek word can be translated, by her continual “bruising”), The judge also does not want to be embarrassed publicly, This widow has the power to bring his unjust ways to light.

It is a story that celebrates human authenticity, The widow breaks the silence of oppression and comes face to face with the unjust judge, Paulo Freire speaks of this as the act of emerging from the culture of silence and naming the world,

Our story from Genesis is yet another celebration of human authenticity, Jacob is well known in the Bible as a cheat and a usurper, He, after all, is the fellow who through an act of deception stole the birthright of his brother Esau, He has been on the run for some time, and in the process, through his crafty nature, he has become a wealthy man, But now he must come face to face with Esau, his estranged brother, Before that face to face meeting, he must come face to face with God, and this is the story for today,

It is night, Jacob has sent his family ahead, as well as the goods he has selected to appease his brother Esau, Jacob comes face to face with an opponent, At first, he does not know who his opponent is, It is all so mysterious, Jacob is a strong human being, His name, after all, means “Supplanter.” Jacob is so strong that his opponent must put his hip out of place in order to get the upper hand, Still, Jacob holds on, He will not let his opponent go until he receives a blessing, It is then that the opponent says, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (Gen 32:28) Jacob receives a new name, No longer Jacob, the Supplanter, he is now called Israel, which probably means “God rules.” Jacob asks for his opponent’s name, and when he receives no answer, he realizes that it is God who has been his opponent, God can name human beings, but human beings cannot possess the name of God – God is simply “God”—in Hebrew, Jahweh – meaning, simply, “I am who I am.”

Jacob now realizes that he has come face to face with God, and yet his life has been preserved.

Jacob becomes an authentic human being, with a new name, a new identity, He has met God “face to face.” Having met God face to face, Jacob can now meet his brother Esau face to face.

Human beings are endowed with an incredible dignity and strength, an authenticity that comes when they speak aloud and break the silence of oppression, when they come face to face with those who would deny them justice, when they come face to face with those whom they have wronged, indeed when they come face to face with God, C. S. Lewis, in his last book, said that until you and I have faces we cannot meet God face to face.

So many examples come to mind from our own place and time, Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay clergyman to be ordained a Bishop in the Episcopal Church, who recently spoke in Honolulu, has decided to do a tour of the islands of the Pacific Basin, so that he can meet Episcopalians who oppose him face to face, He is doing this in order to nurture a climate of tolerance and understanding in a church wracked by conflict over his ordination, I think also of the Buddhist monks of Myanmar who have taken to the streets in order to break the silence of oppression, These are authentic human beings who now have faces and who have once again brought to the world’s attention the Burmese people and their struggle for freedom and for justice,

Then, in light of Glenda Wildschut’s visit that begins this week, we think of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and how the process instituted by the Commission has brought together both the perpetrators and the victims of injustice face to face, The silence of oppression, so long hidden, has been broken, Those who have killed and those whose sons and daughters and husbands and brothers and sisters have been killed meet face to face, Everyone has a name, Truth is spoken, and reconciliation becomes possible,

These are signs of human authenticity in a world in which so many human beings are silent or are silenced, and also nameless, Dare I say that these are signs of God’s kingdom come to earth?

Truly, there is hope for us human beings, The good news is that if we can speak and give voice to our fears and our hopes, and our demands for justice, or our need for forgiveness, and that if we can have a name, and if we can come together face to face, then we can also meet God face to face.

In closing, I celebrate the life of Church of the Crossroads, For when we are our most faithful, we are a community in which we all have names, or, as I have sometimes said, we are at least as good as the Cheer's Bar, where everyone knows your name, We are a community in which we can voice our cry for justice and speak our need for healing and give voice to our hopes and our fears, and know that there will be ears to listen and hearts to respond, We are a community in which we can tell our stories and face one another and meet God face to face, We are a community in which we do not need to remain anonymous, but a community in which we can simply be who we are and celebrated for the authentic human beings we are and are becoming,

Let us remember that the glory of God is a human being fully alive, as St. Irenaeus said so long ago, We can also say that the glory of God is a human being who has fulfilled his or her potential for human authenticity, So may it be for you and me, and for all who struggle for freedom, for peace, and for justice, Amen.