

A Sermon for DaySpring
 By Eric Howell
Wrestling with God and Self
Part One of a series "Lifelong Discipleship"
 Luke 18.1-8
 October 19, 2025

Jesus tells a parable, which he says has a clear purpose: so that you will pray always and not lose heart. The story he then tells is about a persistent widow who will not relent in her appeals for justice from an uncaring, corrupt official. And against all odds she prevails. Jesus asks, "If even a crooked judge will answer a relentless appeal, how much more will the good and generous God?" At the end of the parable, he asks, "When the Son of Man returns will he find faith on earth?" I take it to mean he's saying will he find faith like this on earth? It illustrates these two things: praying always and not losing heart, and enduring in faith, even to the end. We need to hear this word as an encouragement when we are giving up, when we can't seem to make any sense of prayer, and when we are losing heart.

All of our readings this morning point us in this direction. Jacob had come to one of those points in life when you can't go back because of things you've done back then, and you feel like you can't go forward because of the immensity of the challenge in front of you. Behind him is his uncle, Laban, whom he swindled. Before him is his brother, Esau, whom... he had swindled. Jacob had a resume by this point. You're on the run and out of options. Jacob is the image of a person, all alone, in the dark, in the quiet, in the wilderness, when your life has caught up to you. And there's nothing left to do but pray. Something's got to give. Someone's got to prevail. I will not quit until I receive your blessing. He wrestles with a man all night long and only in the end fully realizes and acknowledges he's been wrestling with God. He walked away from the experience with a limp. In some ways, it's a very strange story. In other ways, it's absolutely familiar.

This image of wrestling with God and not giving up is an image of faith—raw faith—wrestling with God. This is the struggle of our discipleship. For good reason, Ron Rolheiser says we are always in the struggle in every phase of our lives. "Faith isn't something you ever simply achieve. It's not something that you ever nail down. Faith works this way: some days, you walk on water, and other days, you sink like a stone. Faith invariably gives way to doubt before it again recovers its confidence, then it loses it again... God, who built us, understands this and is up to the task of wrestling with us and our resistance."

It's helpful to hear that because we can get the idea that the spiritual struggle is only in the deciding to believe in Jesus and then you're baptized, and then, there's just smooth sailing with God and your life after that. But that's not really true for at least most of us, if not all of us. When you have doubts or struggle or feel like God is a long way from where you are, or feel like you're so far from God you can't make it back, it can be confusing when you think you're the only one, and so there must be something must be wrong with you. That you're the problem. But you're not the problem. I mean....you *might* be a problem--we all can be

the problem for ourselves or for others—but what I mean is that if you experience doubt in the struggle for faith, or fidelity in the struggle with temptations, or trust in the struggle for relationship, or despair in the struggle for justice or your vocation, you are not alone. You are in the process, maybe we should say, the furnace of discipleship.

The struggle isn't bad; it's how we're made who we are as we grow and progress from one phase of life to the next. So let us honor the questions, the resistance, the longing, and your honesty in your own wrestling with God and struggle to not lose heart. Today and in the next two weeks, we'll follow these stages of life, from youth to middle age to the end of life, that each have a different shape of struggle in our discipleship.

Rolheiser describes these stages of discipleship. The first, he calls *Essential Discipleship*, describing it as “the struggle to get our lives together.” While the struggle to get our lives together is most deeply felt when we are young, some elements of this struggle will continue throughout our lifetimes and can ironically become a joy. And the struggle to get our life together can explode in our lives at any time and at any point of life, no matter our age, no matter our maturity, when life just seems to crumble and fall apart. Now we are faced again with the struggle to get our lives back together. But when we are young, and we are fully enmeshed in the stage of essential discipleship everywhere we look, it can really feel like wrestling with God and self and an uncertain place in the world and our future.

Knowing this, we strive to give our children a strong foundation. In the beginning of our essential discipleship, we receive the formation of our teachers and the Scripture, as Paul encouraged Timothy. We give our young people knowledge of the books of the bible and the stories of our faith. We teach them about the character of God, salvation in Jesus Christ, the mystery and help of the Holy Spirit. From an early age, children delight in singing songs about God, memorizing key verses of Scripture, drawing pictures that express their faith, asking questions, discovering the goodness of God all around them and in those who love them. Youth learn what it means to serve others and to pray. It's then that we begin to form a devotional life and to give back in service—we learn to give tithes from our meager paychecks, learn to apply ideas we've learned—like forgiveness for friends who hurt us, for saying I'm sorry when we've done wrong. We learn to appreciate the power of the liturgy and the gift of the community of faith.

There comes a moment for many of us when we say: “I believe. I receive Christ as my Savior and my Lord. The faith of my parents and teachers is now my own. I want to be baptized.” This is so special and a beautiful moment to be celebrated in the highest order. Then, along the way, we discover that this beautiful formation of faith and life of faith isn't a straight line; it's a curvy road; a labyrinth is a very good image. I experienced this. I was baptized at age 10. I had some wonderful Sunday school teachers, probably goofed a little too much in some middle school Sunday school classes, and then, along the way found myself embroiled in some big, thorny questions--the kind that feel like impassable ogres guarding the bridge to continued relationship with God. “None shall pass,” or at least, “You shall not pass. Others seem, to fly on by with no problem, but not you. You're stuck

here.” It’s an example of the struggle of faith that takes different shapes in our essential discipleship.

Even children wrestle in their faith. 5th and 6th graders sometimes begin to realize they have questions that they didn’t have before—about God and about themselves and how their faith intersects with a world that’s getting bigger and more complex for them every single day. We adults must remember our own experiences and encourage them that doubt is a part of the journey of faith. New questions and new struggles mean we’ve grown as far as we’re going to grow with what we know now and with where we are now. It means that we’re changing and growing. In some ways, it’s like math class. You go as far as you can go learning one set of skills—say addition, then they throw subtraction at you. Then, you hit multiplication, and once you’ve got that down, you find yourself face to face with long division. It’s really hard at first, and you might say, “I’m no good at math.” Someone who says that might say, “I’m no good at anything.” Some of them say, “I’m just no good.” Sure you are. It’s just that you’ve come up against a part of math you didn’t know before. You’ll learn, you’ll figure out it, and then, it’s kind of fun. Just stick with it.

The struggle of essential discipleship is sort of like that. There’s going to be some questions, some uncertainties, maybe some doubts in God and in yourself. But don’t give up. You’re growing. It can be a little scary when you’re young. You can feel like you’re the only one. You’re not. You can feel like a failure to God and to your parents and teachers. Child, you are not. The Bible talks about God as a potter making and remaking the clay into something beautiful. He is the potter, and we are the clay in his hands.

The struggle of essential discipleship can take years and as it does the questions grow as we grow into young adulthood when the addition and subtraction of everything in life starts to feel like algebra, then, calculus, and then for some of us, differential equations. And even worse: “Who am I?” “What shall I do with my life?” “Who loves me, for me?” “Who will be my lifelong friend?” “Who will marry me?” “What’s my place in my family, in my skin?” “Can you live on ramen and macaroni forever?” Oh, they are big questions, huge--wrestle in the dirt with the God of the universe kind of questions... walk away with a limp kind of struggle. They are the big ones as we try to find our way to our true home. It’s vital to not lose heart on the journey, no matter the challenges, no matter the context. The search for our home in our skin, in our minds and vocations and friendships, and loves, hurts... this is to be home in our prayer, and the integration of all of this is the first major stage in life’s journey. It is your discipleship in the way of Jesus, who knows you and loves you and is with you in it all.

We can shove the struggle and striving aside by focusing on many urgent and unnecessary things. We can occupy and preoccupy ourselves with all manner of secondary realities. We can just lie down in the dirt and give up. Perhaps without even recognizing it, we can neglect what matters most and allow our love for God to grow cold, bit by bit. We just stop wrestling with the big questions and the questions on our hearts--getting our lives together and stop wrestling with God. We stop praying, and we lose heart.

Do not lose heart. Because there is an intense intimacy between Christ and Creation, and Christ and his beloved, Christ is intensely intimate in your struggle and in your hope to become who you are supposed to be. “Work out your salvation,” St. Paul counsels. And so, we do the working out in our minds, our hearts, relationships, vocations, aspirations, and confessions of faith.

The struggle is the journey from here to there, wherever here is for you today and the there you can’t yet see. Pray always and not lose heart. Wrestle, like Jacob, with yourself and with God, all night, all day, all year. Keep at it like the woman--all but helpless and hopeless against forces great than she is, until she prevailed. Pray, wrestle, do not lose hope. Remember God is with you and knows you and loves you and has a purpose for you.

This is the point of the parable and is at the heart of the whole of scripture—that we should pray always and not lose heart. We will find many reasons--or they will find us--to lose heart. When we feel hopeless like the widow in a corrupt and callous system; or ashamed of our past and afraid of our future—like Jacob running away and all alone; or even on good days, the darkness can settle in. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. The Lord is my keeper.

To know the Lord and know who you are in the Lord is the sacred struggle of faith; it is the struggle of our lives. There are times when it feels like our lives have so completely fallen apart that they’ve shattered into a million pieces. We’ve suffered some long division, where there’s little remainder left it can be hard—especially on Sundays or for whole seasons of life, but God is with you. God is in the struggle.

This can be a kind of sacred prayer—a breath prayer, in and out: God is with me. God is in the struggle. And, we walk it together. In the wild and down the middle aisle to the altar where we give and receive the bread broken in remembrance of the one whose brokenness we are assured in grace will make us whole.

Thanks be to God.