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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale*

*Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*October 16, 2022*

*Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8*

The day after she gave birth to her daughter Olympia by C-section, Serena Williams, the greatest tennis player of all time, laid in her hospital bed and suddenly fell short of breath. Years earlier she had experienced a pulmonary embolism and she feared that she was experiencing another one, especially since she was off her anti-blood-clotting medicine due to the C-section surgery. Between gasps, she told a nurse that she immediately needed a CT scan and heparin drip, but the nurse thought that instead her pain medicine was leaving her confused. Serena insisted that no, she needed a CT scan and a heparin drip right away. Soon a doctor came into her hospital room not to bring her for a CT scan, but instead to perform an ultrasound of her legs. Again, Serena insisted that no, she didn't need an ultrasound, she needed a CT scan and a heparin drip. Not surprisingly, the ultrasound revealed nothing, so they sent her for the CT. Sure enough, the CT scan revealed that several small blood clots had settled in her lungs, and minutes later she was on the heparin drip. Later in an interview, she said she remembered telling her medical team, "listen to Dr. Williams!"

It's probably due to Serena Williams' persistence and advocacy for her own health that she survived, and that Olympia still has a mommy.

I think about Serena and other powerful, courageous, persistent women like her when I think about the widow in this story from the gospel of Luke. As you might remember, widows in biblical times often found themselves in a vulnerable and defenseless position when their husbands died. They could not possess their own property, and even if they went to live with a male relative, they were legally subordinate to them. Widows were frequently tricked by those who stole their inheritances, and those who had no inheritance were completely without resources.

In the parable, we don't know who this widow's "opponent" was, but it could have been just about anyone, since her well-being was so threatened. The widow kept coming to the unjust judge saying, "grant me justice against

my opponent." In fact, she kept coming so often that she was wearing the judge down, bothering him by continually coming. The judge, even though he had no fear of God and no respect for anyone, finally gave in and granted her justice.

The widow's persistence probably saved her life, just like Serena's persistence saved her own.

When Jesus told this parable he began it by telling his disciples that they needed to pray always and not lose heart, and finished it by promising that if even an unjust judge can grant justice to a persistent widow, how much more will God grant justice to those who cry to him day and night.

But then Jesus asks a question: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? When he searches, will Jesus find faith on earth?

I'm guessing if we were to define the faith we think Jesus is looking for, we would say that faith is about trusting God, about believing in Jesus, about following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But when Jesus asks here about faith, he's connecting it to a story about someone who is persistent, someone who is begging for justice, someone who perhaps is even angry. Does Jesus also mean that faith is also about unrelenting persistence, about demands for justice, and yes, even about holy, righteous anger?

Lately, I've been reading Brené Brown's new book called "Atlas of the Heart." In it, she describes her research about 87 of the emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human. One of the emotions she describes is anger:

"Anger," Brown says, "is a catalyst. Holding on to it will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing it will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection. It's an emotion that we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, justice" (Brown, 224).

When we think about anger as something that can be transformed into the very things that Jesus was born, lived, and died to bring to bring—love, change, compassion, and justice—it's true that faith is also about holy, righteous anger.

Hear this from your pastor: It's ok to be angry when things aren't right. It's even ok to be angry with God. Open the book of Psalms sometime and read how often the psalmist is mad at God in the very same breath the psalmist praises God. Anger is an indication that things are not as they should be, and anger motivates us to practice persistence and demand justice to make things right.

Think about the Old Testament reading we heard today, Genesis. All night Jacob wrestled with a man who embodied God who struck him in the hip socket and put it out of joint. When Jacob didn't let go even when the day was breaking, he told the man, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Jacob persisted and demanded that God give him a blessing. And God did, and Jacob named the place where he had striven with God and humans Peniel, which means, "the face of God."

Dear friends in Christ, you can wrestle with God until you receive a blessing. You can be angry with God and demand that things change. That's part of what it means to have faith. It is faithful to demand justice, because, as we prayed today in the prayer of the day, "O Lord God, tireless guardian of your people, you are always ready to hear our cries."

God is always ready to hear your cries. God believes you when the world doesn't. God accepts you however you are, however you feel, however angry you might be.

And your anger can even help you create the conditions for God to bring about justice in a suffering world. Last week I watched the livestream of Palestinian Lutheran Pastor Mitri Raheb speaking at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood. Pastor Mitri, the former pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem where Tamar Haddad, our former youth minister attended, has now founded a university in Bethlehem that gives young people an outlet for telling their story through the arts.

Living in the occupied West Bank, young people's verbal stories are often silenced, and the anger of living under Israeli occupation multiplies when they don't have a healthy outlet to express it. But by telling stories through the arts, young people are finding ways to shape their own lives. Through the nonprofit Pastor Mitri runs, Bright Stars of Bethlehem, lives are literally

being saved because anger is being transformed into love, change, compassion, and justice.

Pastor Mitri said, "every time we get angry, we start a new project." And someone joked with him, "now I see why you have so many projects...you must be a very angry man!"

Like Pastor Mitri Raheb, like Serena Williams, like the widow in the gospel, it is ok to be angry and persistent and courageous. It is ok to demand justice from God and to pour your anger into creating the conditions for God to bring about justice. It is not only ok, but it is what Jesus expects of faithful people. It's what the Son of Man is searching for when he looks to find faith on earth.

So keep knocking on the door of reformation, keep demanding justice, keep praying and not losing heart. For it's from your anger that love, change, compassion, and justice can finally come. Amen.