

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, October 16, 2022

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

“Prayer is like wrestling with God”

I recently got a new iPhone 14. It is the first iPhone I have had. The feature I love the most is the three dots after you text someone... meaning that they are reading your text and typing a response. You wait in expectation. Sometimes you see the three dots and nothing comes through. Maybe they can't answer now? You are disappointed. Isn't that the truth? We like immediate responses and immediate feedback. And when we pray, we want answers now.

Well, our lessons for today remind us that a life of prayer is a continuous asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, trust sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry... according to one commentator. It is a process that calls us to be persistent.

An elderly black minister, who went through the civil rights struggle, once read the parable of the persistent widow and said, “Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.”

In our lessons for today, prayer is compared to a wrestling match with God or a widow pleading for justice from a corrupt judge.

We know that sometimes our prayers seem to get answered right away, and other times they appear to fall on deaf ears. For example, in Ukraine, when we watch the news, all we see is the destruction and loss. I know people on both sides of the conflict and throughout the world are praying for a peaceful end to the war, safety for loved ones in battle and for those who have had to flee. It may seem that these prayers aren't being answered soon enough. And yet we see glimpses of hope. Ultimately, we know our God is on a trajectory of justice and is working tirelessly through any created means necessary to bring a peaceful end to this conflict... and all conflicts. So we keep praying.

In our first lesson from Genesis, prayer takes the form of a wrestling match with God. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, is about to

reconnect with his estranged twin brother, Esau... after fleeing from him years earlier. Jacob is afraid of what Esau might do to him for stealing his brother's birthright and his Father Isaac's blessing. So Jacob, needing to return home, sent his family, livestock, and all his possessions across the Jabbok River while he went to the other side to have a talk with God before he crossed over. This talk turned into a wrestling match with an angel or divine figure that lasted all night long. Jacob would not let go until the angel blessed him. He must have channeled his inner Nacho Libre and prevailed.

Can you relate to this idea of wrestling with God? Are the cries of your heart or prayers like a wrestling match with God? How many of you wake up in the middle of the night pleading with God for healing for you or an ill family member, or for healing of a broken relationship, or for your kids if you have them?

Jacob was a changed man after his prayer wrestling match with God. His hip was knocked out of joint and he got a new name, Israel. That is one thing about prayer, it often changes you and your perspective. It is a way of throwing your hands up in the air to God. It is like Psalm 121, lifting your eyes to the hills asking, "From where will my help come?" My help comes from the Lord.

When Jacob returned home and met his brother, he was blessed. When Esau saw his brother, he ran up and kissed him and put his arms around him and forgave him. The boys reconciled after so many years of distance and discord... an answer to prayer.

Then in our Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples and ultimately us to pray always and not to lose heart after he is gone from their sight.

In other words, Prayer isn't a one and done thing. You don't just pray once and then give up. You keep on praying. Prayer is a continual conversation with God. Sometimes Jesus prayed all night long. Even if it seems impossible that your prayer will be answered, Jesus tells us to keep praying... to not give up. He used the example of a powerless widow asking for justice from an unjust judge who didn't care for her or her cause. She finally wore him out with her persistence and he granted her justice.

This is a 'how much more' parable. How much more will a just and merciful God listen to our prayers? It may take time for our prayers to be answered. But we don't lose heart. And finally, just because our world can be cruel and corrupt, and we feel powerless like the widow, we don't let that stop us. We pray in the face of evil.

What I take from these lessons is that God's ear can be bent. And that we need to know that our prayers are grounded in a God who was willing to go to the cross for us... a God who journeys with us in the depths of our struggles... in a God who loves us and desires justice for all. Amen.