

19 Pentecost C

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Trish Schmermund

October 16, 2022

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

Grace and peace to you from Jesus who loves us.

Our confirmation classes always end with us praying over things that have come up in our lives and then reciting The Lord's Prayer together. Except, to throw a wrench into things, I often go off script to try to mess them up by calling out random words and phrases. It's interesting what happens though, they band together, praying louder or cover their ears to block me out and concentrate.

How do you pray? Jesus said that we need to – yet I know that we struggle at times to not only do so, but to understand it. Prayer is an essential ingredient to the life of faith. The persistent widow in our story today is aptly named, she will not give up on prayers that are expectant on full justice for her circumstance.

This might not be the story we would expect Jesus to use to teach us about praying. Good Lutherans close their eyes, bow their heads, and say their prayers in silence. To imagine being an annoying persistent, perhaps even nagging old woman is hardly our first image of faithful prayer. Why would Jesus use such an example?

Let's look closer. First of all, there is an interesting contrast between the two characters of this story. The first is a powerful, influential man, a godless man, a careless man. As privileged as he is, however he meets his match in the widow. As a widow, she has no voice or power or privilege but she is tenacious. She refuses to give up in her quest for justice. Something wasn't right and she wasn't about to be dismissed. The judge, and we may not agree with his reasoning, gives in to her because he just wants the problem gone, not because he has any interest in justice or personal integrity. The story makes perfect sense – we get it – we know people like this!

But there's something missing here. Jesus is teaching about the need to pray and yet no one in this story is obviously praying! There's no folding hands or "dear God" or "God in your mercy," or even an "amen." How is this related to prayer at all?

One of the criticisms or downfalls of Christianity is that we have domesticated (tamed) prayer. We've sort of sterilized it into nice sounding phrases that are recited in worship. Or we imagine we must take a certain stance with our

bodies, calm our minds, use the proper words. Or worse yet, that we need to have someone pray on our behalf. Now, don't get me wrong, there is a place for prayer in worship, times when we need others to give voice on our behalf, but we have narrowed the idea of prayer into too few shapes and practices.

Here we learn that prayer is active. Prayer seeks justice. Prayer confronts apathy. Prayer is our inner power. Prayer changes things and oftentimes changes us. Prayer is a tremendous act of trust and hope.

"Pray always and do not lose heart," Jesus begins, because we do lose heart, we do give up! Life throws a lot on our plate, many people are burdened with injustice, oppression, pain, violence, loneliness and so much more. Might we take on a mantle of prayer that is as nagging and ugly as the widow? Might we imagine that when we bring in a bag of groceries for the Food Bank that is actually an act of faithful prayer? Or how about when we hand money to someone on the street – could we say an "amen?" If you were to write a letter to a political leader seeking change for the community – would you consider that a prayer? We're invited to expand our practice and thinking to a wide diversity of practice. Persistent prayer is the work of justice for the world – if we learn to pray more often with our feet moving, our hands active, our minds discerning, our hearts filled with compassion then even the actions of the faithless are altered.

"Pray always," Jesus teaches, hinting to us that prayer is to be infused into our days. It's not just to be reserved for special occasions, Sunday mornings, or desperate times. Prayer is the privilege of every member of God's family.

Prayer is also hard and patient work. The widow didn't get justice for a long time, long enough that she became an annoyance. Can we pray like that? Can we commit to the long haul of prayer even when it seems like our prayers are unanswered?

I've prayed some really good prayers in my life, prayers that were caring, restoring, beneficial, healing. I've prayed for peace, for sick children to live, for marriages to make it, for abuse to stop, for families to be mended. Lots of times I never know the outcome. Sometimes I do and the outcome wasn't the same as what I asked. Has that happened to you? I don't really have an answer for why, but I don't believe that when it seems that prayers go unanswered it is because God doesn't care, or isn't listening, or isn't there. And it's not because you didn't say the right words or kneel or are not worthy of a response. Sometimes, no matter how good our prayers or how persistent we are, we don't get the answer we wanted.

Perhaps this is why Jesus also encouraged, “do not lose heart.” We may be tempted, as in Psalm 121, to lift our eyes to the hills – as if we’re watching the horizon for the calvary to come to our aid, but as the Psalm clearly reminds us, our help comes from God. Sometimes we find ourselves at the crossroad of faith and doubt – where we find our prayers and hopes intersecting with the challenges we face. Jesus reminds us that discipleship is less about the end results than it is about the path we walk today; as we journey remember scripture defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). We pray, because we hope and we hope, because we pray.

So, this morning we are inviting you to a different way to pray, a different way to hope. In our time of prayers, we invite you to act out of your normal, out of your comfort zone, to engage in prayers differently. In that time, Pr. Lindsey will invite you to come forward and offer your prayers at different stations or to include them in the chat online. Take a chance, try something new, pray with your feet, mind, hands, computers – and we will lift those prayers together as a community.

As we pray, we trust in God who loves us, and we know love always changes things. Amen.