

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 29

October 21, 2007

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

In the early 1900's in Switzerland, a small village church needed a new roof. So, immediately following every Sunday service, the congregation would take time to pray for a new roof. And at the end of the prayer meeting, there would be a collection.

One old man of the congregation was renown for being very tight fisted. He used to come in at the end and sit at the back while the prayer meeting was taking place. That way, he could make a quick escape when the collection plate came around.

One Sunday, just as he was going to the prayer meeting, he was held up and came in a little late. Unfortunately there was no seating left in the back, so he was forced to take a seat in the front.

During the prayer meeting, a piece of roof fell and hit him on the head. His first thought was that God was speaking to him. So immediately he stood up and said, "I will give \$1000." Suddenly, a voice in the back rang out: "Hit him again Lord!"

Well, is this how God speaks to us? Perhaps sometimes, that's what it takes.

One of my all time favorite plays is "Fiddler on the Roof". It was first introduced in 1964 and became one of the longest running plays on Broadway.

It portrays a Jewish man named Tevye (Tevia) who was a milkman and a father of five girls. His daughters are yearning for something new and exciting in life.

After all, there is a great big world waiting to be discovered apart from their life in the small village of Anatevka. And all their father talks about is "Tradition!"

But I kind of like Tevye. He is very human – a common sort of man. But at the same time, he is wise beyond many so-called wise people of this world. He can see beyond the simple to the complex, the inner conscious of things. He also has a good relationship with his God. He is comfortable with God.

He can talk freely with God about most any subject. His prayers to God are from the depth of his being, and at times they are very humorous. But at the same time those prayers reflect the concerns he has with his life and the world around him. I would like to share with you just one of his conversations with God.

Listen not only to his words, but his feelings:

Tevye is talking to God: *“Today I am a horse. Dear God did you have to make my poor old horse lose his shoe just before the Sabbath. That wasn’t nice. It’s enough you pick on me, Tevye, bless me with five daughter, a life of poverty. What have you got against my horse? Sometimes I think when things are too quiet up there, You say to Yourself: ‘Let’s see, what kind of mischief can I play on my friend Tevye?’”*

He continues talking to God: *“As the good book says, heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed. In other words, send us the cure, we’ve got the sickness already. I’m not really complaining – after all, with your help, I’m starving to death. You made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it’s no shame to be poor, but it’s no great honor either. So what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?”*

Can you sense the comfort, the ease with which Tevye had in talking with God? Maybe his theology wasn’t the best blaming God for all of his troubles. But his expression – his right to express these kinds of feelings to God is what prayer is all about. Prayer is asking, prayer is wondering.

Prayer is bringing to God all of the feelings from the depths of our souls, so that we might lay them before God’s throne. Prayer is about crying out to God with our inner longings, our concerns, our problems – all of the things that make us who we are, and what we are.

As you can tell by now, our Gospel reading today concerns prayer. Jesus tells the disciples that they are to pray always and to not lose heart. But how can WE do that? Pray seems so simple, but at the same time, so complex. Prayer can also be challenging.

First of all, I believe that prayer is a struggle – a tug of war between parts of ourselves, between us and God, between us and others. Prayer is a struggle of searching, of asking, of bringing ourselves to God. In our first reading today, Jacob is actually wrestling with God.

Jacob has just returned to his homeland to make peace with his brother Esau. His

conscious is still bothering him about stealing the birthright from Esau. But Jacob also knows that through his brokenness, God has used him to build a mighty nation – the nation of Israel.

This fight symbolizes for Jacob, and for us, the struggle to understand the mysteries of God – to make sense out of the brokenness of this world – to discover the course that God wants him to take. Through this struggle, Jacob establishes a stronger, newer, better relationship with God.

Has prayer ever been a struggle for you? I know it has been for me. Sometimes it seems that the harder I pray, the more God seems distant. It's easy to want to give up all together.

We can also find this struggling with prayer in our Gospel reading. Jesus uses a shady character, a dishonest judge, to make a point about the goodness of God. A poor widow was wronged by someone, and her case was in court. The judge, being a dishonest man, wasn't in too much of a hurry to settle the case.

You see, in those days, most judges were corrupt. This woman, being poor, did not have any bribe money to help the judge along in deciding her case. So, she keeps coming to him asking that she be given protection, justice, and that her rights be honored.

Here, Jesus is contrasting this dishonest judge with the loving father. If a dishonest person can be persuaded through persistence to make a decision, how much more likely will your loving father in heaven listen to your pleadings?

There was a three-year-old boy who went to the grocery store with his mother. Before they entered the grocery store, she said to him; "Now you're not going to get any chocolate chip cookies, so don't even ask."

She put him up in the cart and he sat in the little child's seat while she wheeled down the aisles. He was doing just fine until they came to the cookie section.

He saw the chocolate chip cookies, and he stood up in the seat and said; "Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?" She said; "I told you not even to ask. You're not going to get any cookies." So he sat back down.

They continued down the aisles, but in their search for certain items, they ended up back in the cookie aisle. "Mom, can I PLEASE have some chocolate chip cookies?" "I told you that you can't have any. Now sit down and be quiet" she said.

Finally, they were approaching the checkout lane. The little boy sensed that this may be his last chance. So just before they got to the line, he stood up on the seat of the cart and shouted in his loudest voice; "In the name of Jesus, may I have some chocolate chip cookies!"

Soon everyone around the checkout area was laughing. Some even applauded. And, due to the generosity of the other shoppers, the little boy and his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies. Perhaps sometimes persistence does pay off. But there are other instances when persistence in pray doesn't seem to make a difference.

There was a magazine cartoon that shows a young girl kneeling beside her bed for her bedtime prayer. She begins by saying; "Dear God, Uncle Jim still doesn't have a job; Sis still doesn't have a date for the prom; Grandma is still feeling sick – and I'm tired of praying for this family and not getting any results!"

Probably all of us have felt this way, at one time or another. Every one of us has probably felt like giving up on seeing answers to our prayers. Maybe we haven't quit praying all together, but just for certain things.

Jesus knew that his disciples, including you and me would be tempted to quit praying. But the truth is; prayer does not always get us what WE want. Prayer gets us what GOD wants for us. And sometimes, that can make us frustrated and perhaps even cause us to lose hope.

Secondly, prayer is also an encounter with God. In our struggles to bring our longings, our searchings, our inner feelings to God, we actually encounter God. We come in contact with God. Jacob came in physical contact with God. We are told that he actually wrestled with God.

The woman in our Gospel was threatening to become physical with the judge. For the judge says; "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming to me." Or as one translation says; "That she will not come and knock me out!!!"

So that brings us to the age-old question concerning our prayer life with God. How will this loving God who we struggle with in prayer – whom we encounter through the Holy Spirit – and whom we trust and believe in. How will this loving, caring God answer our prayers?

Notice that Jesus doesn't get into that question. He just says to pray and to not lose heart. Pray and struggle with God. Jesus says pray and encounter God – come into relationship with him. Jesus says have faith – trust that a loving God does care for you very much. And then Jesus says, leave the answering to him.

Like Teyve, prayer is indeed a talk with God. It is a talk from the depths of our souls. And therefore we struggle to bring to God the very essence of our being. For prayer is an encounter with God in a very real way.

It is indeed our spirit and the Holy Spirit mingling together so that our cries, our pleadings, our joys, our celebrations will be placed before the throne of heaven.

And finally, prayer brings us deeper into a relationship with God. It calls us to trust, to believe, to have faith that God WILL answer; God WILL respond, because God loves us so very much.

Most of you should have recently received a letter in the mail asking you to join the “5-10 Club.” This coincides with our Faith Venture 2007... stewardship appeal. I am asking that for ten consecutive days, you spend at least five minutes per day in prayer.

This is an exciting time in our congregation. It is also a stressful time – a time of expectancy and uncertainty. And because of that, I am convinced that we cannot make it through this on our own without being in constant prayer.

For Jesus calls us to pray always and do not lose heart. And our faith tells us to believe that the grace of God is sufficient for us. God alone – God alone reaching his hand of love into our lives is all that we need to trust in, as we journey through this gift we call life.

Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.

Amen.