

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost October 20 2019

### Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 18:1-8

“Jesus told them a parable about the necessity that they pray at all times and not to lose heart.”

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul puts it this way, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Pray at all times, pray without ceasing. Okay...what kind of prayers?

The earliest prayers I remember were bedtime and mealtime prayers we prayed as a family. Now I lay me down to sleep.... or Come lord Jesus, be our guest... Are these what Jesus wants us to pray at all times, without ceasing? Kind of like that earworm song that gets in your head and you just can't get rid of? So we go down the road each day, “Come Lord Jesus....” While that might lead to some interesting context for the drive, as we pass fields of corn, beautiful houses, enter our place of work or school, and perhaps more than a few side glances from folks if you're doing it out loud, I don't think this is what Jesus is talking about.

Now, repetition of a breath prayer can be a way of praying at all times- “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” is one of my favorite. For there are many times during the day when I know I am in need of God's grace and mercy. But even this falls short of what I think Jesus is getting at.

Instead of thinking about how we pray at all times, let's look at what Jesus' words suggest about God. If we are to pray at all times then that means

that we have access to God at all times and places. God surely doesn't expect us to do this prayer in church all day every day. We've got groceries to get, school to go to, yards to mow, work to do, games to play, people to see. So, prayer, conversation with God, happens wherever we happened to be. God is present for conversation whether we are in the car, in our classroom, about to go to sleep, at our work.

This reminds us of Paul's letter to the Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God or the promise of the Psalmist from Psalm 121 that God watches our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forever more.

Okay, we can pray anywhere because God is available to us at any time or place. Pray at all times...at good times and at bad.

Pray at the birthday celebration of your mom or best friend. Pray at another successful harvest or winning that close game. Pray when you realize how you JUST missed hitting that car. Pray when you get that new bike or other toy.

AND

Pray when you receive that diagnosis of cancer. Pray when you didn't just miss that car. Pray when the harvest sucks and you just lost that game. Pray when your mom or your best friend dies.

Pray at all these times, because God is with you. Present at all of these times, and it is to our benefit to remember that through prayer.

See, prayer is not for God's benefit, but ours. Matthew 6:8 reminds us that God knows what we need before we ask. God doesn't need us to tell God

what we need. But the asking, the thanking, the praising that we do in prayer reminds us not only that God is present with us in all of those times and places, but also that God hears. Even as God heard the cries of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. And answered them through Moses.

Prayer, conversation with God, reminds us of the nearness of God. So near, that we can in prayer wrestle with God even as Jacob did by the river Jabbok. What a vivid description of a man who was afraid, torn over what was to come and who expressed that fear, that division as wrestling with God.

These prayers of wrestling with God are the prayers that begin with Why? What am I to do? Where are you!? What's up with this!?

These prayers, the conversation that happens with God within them, are like a wrestling match, a give and take, a push and pull. A grappling, pulling God closer to us. Holding on for dear life. These can be the best prayers because we have to take time to listen for a response. To hear where God is pushing back. To ponder our next move.

These are the best prayers, because we know that in the wrestling, we are blessed. In the encounter with God, we may come out of it limping, (it's hard work after all) but we come out prepared to face the thing we fear most. For Jacob, it was the brother he had cheated. For us, it may be facing our own mortality or (even more challenging) the mortality of someone we love. But the promise is that within that encounter with God, that striving, we will be blessed. We will come out stronger.

Pray always.

The author Anne Lamott talks about three kinds of prayer. Help, Thanks, Wow! I think she's on to something.

We pray for help. We turn to God when we are not strong enough, smart enough, powerful enough... to prevent this thing from happening to us or someone we love. To figure out which way to go. We pray for help when we are about to go under, literally or figuratively.

An example of the prayer for help is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Father, remove this cup from me! I don't want to do this! He asks for the very thing he most desires.

I was asked recently about the way to pray when someone we love is very sick, on the verge of death. What do we pray for? Can we dare to pray for cure? That God would remove this sickness entirely? Or should we pray for healing? A wholeness that brings life, but may not bring cure?

I think in these situations we follow Jesus' example. We pray for what we most want, and then we place our trust in God regardless of what the outcome is. Even as Jesus cried "Remove this cup from me!" his final prayer was, "Not what I want, but what you want". This matches the very definition of the word prayer in Greek which is towards/exchange wish. Prayer is exchanging our wishes for God's.

I think we pray for what our heart desires most. And I think part of the value of prayer is that even as we do that, we ponder what it is we desire most in this situation. Is it cure from the disease, or is it healing, a wholeness in body and spirit regardless of health?

We pray to say thanks. Thank you for this beautiful day. Thank you for my grandmother who has loved me so well. Thank you for the brains to pass that test. Thank you for the ability to run. Thank you for a community to welcome me.

We say thank you when we receive something from someone. By praying our thanks, at all times, we acknowledge the reality that God is the source of all things. That ultimately, it is God who provides those people we love, the abilities we have, the beauty around us.

And the side benefit to praying thanks always is we see more to be thankful for!

We pray to say, Wow! These are the prayers of praise. Wow! God, you have created an incredible world. That a seed planted 6 months ago can produce this plant, food for us and for our livestock. Wow! God, what love you have for us, that you sent your Son...who died so that I might live.

Prayers of Wow! remind us of the mystery, power, and wonder of God.

We pray for help. We pray to say thank you. We pray to say, Wow! And we pray always.

And that is the encouragement to not lose heart. To persist in your prayer. Even as the woman persisted in her pleas for justice from the judge. She had every right to call for justice from him because as a widow she had standing in the court. He, as judge, was required to respond according to Jewish law. That's why his hesitation would have been so shocking to Jesus' audience.

How much more do we have standing with God the very one who has, through the waters of baptism, claimed us as God's own children? So, we stand before God and cry out...again and again... for justice, for healing.

And in that prayer, we learn more about who God is and who we are. In that prayer, that persistent calling upon the relationship that exists between us and God, we exhibit the faith that Jesus wonders if it will be present.

For prayer shows that we know we need God. That we are not masters of our own fate. That we are vulnerable; to death, disease, sin.

That prayer shows a trust, a faith that is active. One that inhabits every part of our life. A faith that moves us, because we realize how often God answers prayer through us. Prayer, like faith, leads to action.

When we pray for all people to be fed, we do so with the understanding that I may be the way God is feeding someone today. I may be the way God answers their prayer for food. How powerful is that! To be God's answer to someone's prayer. So we go about the day looking for that opportunity.

When we pray for compassion to be shown, we do so with the understanding that I may be the way God's compassion comes to someone. My arms may be God's wrapped around them. My voice may be God speaking to them. My vote and my action may be what decides a change in policy towards compassion.

This is the prayer Jesus calls us to in this text. A prayer that moves us to act with and on behalf of the God to whom we pray. And this matches the active faith that is such a part of the Gospel of Luke.

It is necessary that we should pray always and not to lose heart in that prayer. Necessary not for God, but for us. For our benefit.

I would encourage you this week, or let's start small and just for the rest of today, to look for those places where you can pray Help! Thanks! Wow! These do not need to be sophisticated prayers. O God, help me with this! Thank you, Jesus, for the joy I find in this moment. Wow, God! That's amazing.

I'll be interested to hear how this goes.