SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 19, 2025
GENESIS 32:22-31; PSALM 121; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5; LUKE 18:1-8

WHAT WINNING LOOKS LIKE

Luke 18:1-8 *[Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"]*

What does winning look like these days? Is the justice of an unjust judge the best we can hope for right now? Jesus says No. He says that God will quickly grant justice to those who pray for it day and night. I wonder what kind of watch he's wearing, which battlefields he's tracking, because his version of "quick" and mine are not the same. To be fair, my prayers aren't quite day and night. Like many of us, I lose track; I lose patience; I lose heart. If though, as 2nd Timothy claims, that Scripture is useful in training us to be proficient and equipped for every good work, then let's see where wrestling with it – and with prayer – takes us this week.

First, back to the Gospel. Why do the disciples need the reminder to pray always and not lose heart? Rewind a few verses, and Jesus is telling them that "the kingdom of God is among you" right now. They're having a hard time seeing it. Sounds familiar. Then as now, the would-be kings of this earth appear to have the upper hand. Their lies and greed seem to be rewarding them handsomely, while those who oppose them are punished and demonized.

Skipping prayer and losing heart in such circumstances can feel like a rational response.

Jesus then shares a parable. The widow's request seems fair enough: "Grant me justice against my opponent." Of course, we don't know the merits of her case or what justice means in her eyes, only that she's relentlessly vocal in pursuing it. My point: we don't need to assume that her motives here are pure or uncomplicated or that she's the "model" anything to appreciate her struggle or what she may have learned by speaking up for herself. There is value in naming our needs, messy as they are. The parable ends with the widow winning this time; her persistence is rewarded. Sometimes, that's what winning looks like.

At other times, victory is a lot less clear. Take Jacob, for instance. His prayer for protection, prior to where we pick up with him today in Genesis, is far from pure. He's about to reunite with the brother he wronged 20 years before. It was one thing for him to trade his brother Esau's birthright for a bowl of lentils when they were young; if Esau was dumb enough to make that swap, then one could say shame on him. But impersonating Esau to their dying father just so he'd get the blessing his father intended for Esau – by any moral calculus, that's wrong.

Jacob has been on the run from his brother ever since. Since then, he's gotten married, had children, and done pretty well for himself – until the call from God becomes unmistakable: he needs to go home and face his brother at last. God promises that if he does this, God will do good by him. So, Jacob sends everything and everyone ahead and tries, to no avail, to rest. It's not clear who he ends up wrestling with all night. At first, it seems to be a man; by morning, Jacob is convinced it's God. And if it is God, then this direct, unmediated contact knocking body, mind and spirit out of joint is, in its deepest sense, prayer. Nothing so tame as what we typically settle for in prayer, but prayer, nonetheless.

Jacob knows, on some level, that a stolen blessing is no blessing at all. When we're blessed by another, all that is good in us is called forth. A true blessing can't be stolen or even earned with good behavior. It can only be offered as a gift. What Jacob gets in this wrestling match is more than he could know to ask for. Along with a blessing

and a strength he'd never know otherwise, he's given a new name, Israel, because as he's told, he has striven with God and with humans and has prevailed. He doesn't emerge unscathed, though. For the rest of his life, he'll walk with a limp. But the limp is not a sign of his failure; like most of our scars, it's a sign of survival and resilience. Whatever Jacob will soon face with his brother, it's nothing compared to what he's just gone through with his God. To paraphrase preacher Fred Craddock, this prayer, this nightlong wrestling match, has stretched Jacob into a vessel that can hold the answers to his prayers. Sometimes, this is what winning looks like.

What does this have to do with us now? How might these Scriptures train us to be proficient and equipped at a time when every good work we can manage is needed? Well, they expand our notion of prayer, for one. Prayer was never meant to be a cheap substitute for action.

If, as the Prayer Book Catechism reminds us, prayer is "responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words," then it is something we can do always – because God never stops being present to us, day or night.

Prayer is not a magic formula where we say the right words and get the expected result. It's more powerful than that. Over time and in communities like this one to hold us accountable, it can teach us what we wouldn't learn any other way. Whether it's by speaking up for ourselves and naming our needs, only to find our needs changing in the light of God's love, or by calling forth a strength in the darkness we never knew we had, true prayer sharpens our hunger for justice. It makes us work harder to achieve it and deepens our gratitude when it's finally realized. And by forcing us to be honest, prayer reminds us that our hope is not in the purity of our motives or the immediacy of our results. It's in the character of the just and loving God who inspires our prayer in the first place. In the Name of the One who makes us part of the answers we pray for, Amen.

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