

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

October 16, 2016

“Changed by God”

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A pastor friend of mine told me about a time that she got a call from a young man, who said that his mother was really sick with the flu and wondered if my friend would come over and pray for her. My friend knew his family and knew that they are very active in another congregation in town - so my friend asked him why he didn't call his own pastor to come over and pray. He said, “Because we don't want to take the chance that our pastor might catch what my mother has.”

Prayer is one of the disciplines of the spiritual walk of anyone who believes in Jesus. We all pray. Even if we never get down on our knees and pray, we still pray. The living of our lives is our daily prayer but there are other times when we need to speak our minds, our needs, our feelings, our fears, our hopes, our praise, our thanksgiving, our concerns, our grief, our emergencies, our health, our loved one's health, our sorrow over sin, the presidential election, our guilt, our dreams, our worries, natural disasters, our children, our grandchildren, our marriages, our sexuality, our plans, ourselves and the list could go on and on.

These lives we live can be very complicated and we long for a clearer vision, a more confident walk, with some assurances that God really does listen and is for us rather than against us. Our experiences with our lives of prayer vary within the day. One moment we are talking about answered prayer and the next about how we wonder why God doesn't answer a prayer that seems to be right and good.

One year on a sermon note form, a student wrote, “Why doesn't God put wrath on really bad people?” We all wonder about God and things that happen and things that don't happen. We all struggle with our prayers and those struggles range from wondering if we are worthy to even ask anything of God to how much faith does one need to have before God will answer our prayers.

Many of us struggle with prayer - is God really listening? Does God hear me? And yet we persist in prayer, knowing that Jesus showed us how to pray. Martin Luther said that this is our number one reason for praying, “Because Jesus commanded us to pray.” Prayer has become for

many of us, our hotline to God and its meaning is dependent on our awareness of the answers we get from God. Things are good if we get what we ask for. If we don't, it is easy to doubt God or to doubt ourselves and we become discouraged in our praying.

When it comes to this, the first lesson story of Jacob has something powerful to offer. Jacob wrestled all night with God and he was commended for it. The man (presumably an angel) wrestling with him said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Yet, Jacob asked for the man's name and didn't receive it. It was believed that by having the man's name he could have gained power over him. Instead Jacob limped out of there—amazed—but limping just the same. He had not gained a victory but had been given a blessing that he didn't ask for. He was also given that bad hip.

We all have limps. We all have stories where we have prevailed and stories of where we fell flat. We have prayers that are answered everyday and prayers that aren't. I pray everyday for the health and safety of my family. So far, the prayer for safety has been answered except for some falls, but the prayer for health varies. Like most of us, we all get sick with the seasonal things that go around and we all have the health concerns that are particular to our bodies. One prayer answered, the other no so much. We all have limps.

So, then, what do we say about a parable told by Jesus that is meant to encourage us "about (our) need to pray always and not to lose heart." It seems that the meaning of the parable is clear. There was a judge that refused to be influenced by God or humans but did what he thought he ought to do. He was inclined to ignore this woman who was demanding justice but in the end gave her what she wanted because she was continually coming and asking. Her persistence wore him down. So Jesus tells his disciples that if someone who doesn't care can be convinced by persistence, think how much easier it is to receive from One whose love for us is declared, who desires to give us good things! Jesus says, "He will quickly grant justice." Then Jesus adds the line, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

If we take the parable seriously, then the parable would suggest that Jesus is asking if there will be anyone who is praying with persistence when the Son of Man comes. Will everyone lose heart and just stop praying? The parable might suggest that there will be faith because there are people, God's chosen ones, like the widow, who will keep praying until justice is given.

When I look at my own life and my need to have my prayers answered, I don't like this scripture lesson. It seems to suggest that if my prayers are not being answered the way I want them to be answered, then it is probably my fault. This then puts me on a road where I start looking for some formula that will guide me in my prayers. We can find book after book that gives the

secret to effective prayer. Most of them tell us how we are praying wrongly and how we ought to be praying and then offers a promise that when we get it right, then we will get answers to our prayers that we want. They make the answers more about us than about God.

Do you believe “prayer changes” things as the bumper sticker says? I do. The number one thing it changes is me. I believe that God listens to our prayers and thus knows us intimately. When we listen to God’s answer, we get to know God intimately. Yet, we know that we always go to God with our limp. We recognize that God is God and that our perspective is always colored by our fear, pain and sorrow. We come to God to receive what God wants to give, not what we are out to get.

Our understanding of the cross of Christ tells us that we have a God who suffers with us, who joins us in our suffering. There are willful and random realities to our world that are necessary for our world to be what it is. There are any number of people who would make the world a better place if they were struck dead by lightning. There is a huge amount of suffering that would be eliminated if we were more willing to simply share. Imagine the difference if there was a single cure for all forms of cancer. Why are there places in the world where children starve? Most of us would like God to make it happen.

Living in our world is complicated indeed. While this parable is about persistence and prayer and hope, maybe it is also about the persistence of God. Maybe it is us who, even though we fail to fear God or care about people, are finally worn down by the persistence of a God who longs for justice. Maybe prayer isn't the way in which we manipulate God, but is simply the posture in which we finally become worn down by God's persistence -- God's persistence in loving us. God's persistence in forgiving and being known. And God's persistence in being faithful and always, always, always bringing life out of death.

Maybe the persistence of our prayer is nothing more than our spiritual exposure to the persistence of God's longing for a world of justice and beauty -- a world where we are finally no longer alone but connected to God and each other in ways that are as surprising as a parable. Ways which seem ordinary but which reveal a different kind of relationship. And to pray is to connect ourselves to this persistent longing of God.

In the end, God’s grace triumphs. We are not abandoned to our limp but are held in love and in the end, we know that love prevails.

Thanks be to God. Amen