Sermon | Proper 24C

TEXT: Luke 18:1-8

16 October 2016

Wrestling with God

*In the Name of +Jesus.*

“[Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

“Pray, and do not lose heart.”

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to pray in this way: “Our Father who art in heaven.” Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer, invites us to think of God as a Father. So that, as Luther says, “with all boldness and confidence we might approach him as dear children approach their dear father.”

And why is it so wonderful that Jesus invites us to think of God as Father? Because, what is a good father? What does a good father do? A good father is never distant from his children, but is always there for his children. A good father loves his children, he blesses his children, and hears the cry of his children in all of their trouble.

And so it is with God. Jesus invites you to think of God as Father. And with these words, Jesus invites you to think of God not as a distant God—a God who cares little about you, or the troubles you’re facing in life, and not as an angry Judge either, a wrathful, vengeful God who is out to get you, or punish you for your sin to die—but as a Father, a Father who loves you, a Father who hears you, a Father who helps you in every trouble, for the sake of his Son.

Dear saints, God become your Father at your Baptism. When you were baptized, God adopted you as his own son, his own daughter, and made you an heir of salvation. So that everything Jesus won for you by his cross and death, was given you there, in the water. And if we want to know for certain, whether God loves us or is kindly disposed to us, all we have to do is look to the cross. Because the cross tells the story of the God who loved us so much that he gave his only Son, to pay for our sin, to reconcile us to himself, so that we might be no longer an enemy of God in sin, estranged from the God who made us, and gave us life, but so that we might become his own son, his own daughter in Baptism.

So pray. And don’t lose heart. This is important to remember. Because from our perspective, it so often seems like God is deaf to our prayers, and slow to answer them. We pray again and again and again for an end to the trouble in our lives. But we wake up the next day and find that the trouble is still there. Life is still complicated. People hurt us. Family, friends, they fail us. Our own struggles with sin go on. We can’t understand it. We can’t make sense of it. We don’t know what to do. Our lives are broken. Our hearts still ache with pain, grief, loss. In those moments were tempted to believe, that God is less our Father in heaven, and more like the judge in today’s parable: that doesn’t care, that he isn’t listening.

Jesus knows you and he knows that struggle. Because Jesus too is a human being, just like you. He knows what it’s like to be you. He knows what it’s like to hear the devil’s voice, tempting you to give up on God, to despair of the Lord’s word and promises—because Jesus suffered that same temptation. He was tempted in every way that you are. Because he’s your brother in the flesh. And so the words of our Lord this morning are encouragement to us that we should always to pray and not lose heart.

In the Gospel from Luke 18 we have the story of the Persistent Widow. And the story goes like this: there was a certain city with a judge there who neither feared God nor respected man. That means he was a pretty rotten guy. He couldn’t care less about seeing that God’s justice was done. And he couldn’t care less about people, seeing that justice was done to them. But there was a certain widow in that city. And we have to understand this, that in the first century, if you were a widow you had nothing. First of all, she would’ve had no money, because women didn’t work in the ancient world—she would have been financially very desperate. Second of all, women had very little influence in court—they couldn’t serve as witnesses, hardly anyone would listen to them, or hear their case. So this widow has a lot against her.

But one thing she’s got going for her, is she is tenacious. She is persistent. She goes back to that judge each and every day, saying, “*Give me justice against my adversary*.” And the judge kept putting her off, putting her off, not listening to her, ignoring her plea, throwing her out of court. But one day, this judge—this wicked, unjust judge, well—he had enough. He had enough of her persistence, her nagging, her continually beating down his door to get a hearing. And so the judge says “*Though I neither fear God nor respect man, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming*.”

That’s pretty funny. All the men in the congregation can relate to this. “Honey we need a dishwasher.” “Okay, but first let me go golfing.” “Honey we need a dishwasher.” “Okay, but first let me fix the sink.” “Honey we need a dishwasher.” “Okay so I’m getting a dishwasher?” “You’re getting a dishwasher.”

What’s the point? The point is persistence. And Jesus is using this parable to encourage us toward persistence in prayer. The first thing we have to say is what Jesus is not doing. What Jesus is not doing, he is not comparing God to this unjust judge. Remember what we said about God? He is your Father. He loves you, cares for you, and he is interested in getting justice for you—justice through the death of his Son, who dies, suffering the punishment you deserved, so that in his place, you might be acquitted of all transgression, declared innocent and righteous in Jesus.

God is nothing like this unjust Judge. He’s the opposite of this unjust judge, who couldn’t care less about the woman or her trouble. But what’s the point? But Jesus point is this: if she can get something out of this wicked guy, simply by her persistence, how much more can we get from God, by persisting with him in prayer? I call it the how much more argument. If this widow can get what she needs out of this judge by persistence, who doesn’t care about her one bit, how much more can we get what we need from God, who does care about us, so much that he gave his only Son for us, by persisting with him in prayer?

That’s the message for today. Jesus encourages us toward persistence in prayer. And that is how our Gospel and Old Testament lessons are related. The Old Testament gave us another picture of persisting with God in prayer. And it was the story of Jacob wrestling with God.

Who was Jacob? Jacob we remember, was the second-born son of his father Isaac. Jacob and Esau were twins. Esau was born first. But as Esau is born, coming out of the birth canal, Jacob is there, hanging onto his heel. A bit of a foretaste of what’s to come for these two brothers. When Jacob and Esau get older, when their father Isaac is old and blind, Jacob seeks to steal the right of firstborn son from his brother. So he puts on Esau’s clothes. Covers his arms and the back of his neck in goat hair because his brother Esau was hairy. So that when he comes to his father Isaac, Isaac touches him, thinks it is Esau, and he gives Jacob the blessing of Esau. Jacob, he’s not a good guy. He’s a trickster, a deceiver. That’s what the name Jacob means, “deceiver.” He tricked his brother out of the right of the firstborn son.

But now, fast forward to our Old Testament, Jacob’s brother Esau is out to get him. Esau has 400 men. And they’re after Jacob, seeking his life. And Jacob find himself all alone and afraid. His brother wants to kill him. And he has no way to fight back, no way to defend himself. Now, Jacob has got nothing.

That’s when this mysterious man meets him there in the wilderness. And the two of them begin to wrestle. And they wrestle until the break of day. Somewhere along the line, Jacob realizes that the man he is wrestling with is God. And what’s even stranger, Jacob starts to win. In the course of the match, God seeks to escape. But Jacob holds on for dear life. He says, “*I will not let you go until you bless me*.” So God blesses him, gives him a new name, and the next day Jacob and Esau make peace.

What’s the connection between the two readings? The connection is that sometimes in life, we will find ourselves like the widow or like Jacob—we’ve got nothing. And, this is the great paradox of the Christian life—it is precisely those moments when we realize we have nothing, that God is closest to us, and most at work. Because God uses those moments in life when we’ve got nothing, to show us that he is everything, all that we need for life and salvation, and teaches us persistence in prayer.

The widow had nothing. So she went to the judge. She persisted with him for justice. Jacob had nothing. So he wrestled with God. He persisted with God for God’s blessing. And here’s the truth for today, dear saints: God wants you to wrestle with him too. God wants you to persist with him in prayer. He doesn’t ever want you to stop clawing and clamoring and hungering and thirsting for his justice, for his mercy.

And so the Lord will use the troubles in your life, all the afflictions and burdens you are now suffering, as occasions to drive you ever deeper into his word and prayer, as occasions to drive you farther away from a proud self-reliance, and farther into a total reliance on him for everything that you need.

You see the paradox? When we are at our lowest, that’s when God is at his highest in our life. When we are at our worst, that’s when God is at his best to help and to save. When we’ve been brought to nothing, that’s when God becomes everything, his grace, his mercy, becomes everything, all we need.

I firmly believe that when we get to heaven and look back on our lives, we will see that all our lowest moments were really our highest moments, all our worst moments were really our best moments. Because it was precisely in those moments we became nothing, that God was teaching us faith, and trust, and reliance, and persistence in crying out to him in every trouble. In other words, it was precisely in those moments we became nothing, God became all in all.

So in your affliction and trouble, pray, and do not lose heart. God’s grace is sufficient for you. His power is made perfect in weakness. He is your Father in heaven, who loves for you, cares for you, and gives you all you need in Christ Jesus. And he will see you through from death to life. Amen.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*