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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 18:1-8
Not Losing Heart

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

¹And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1, RSV)

Now, that is quite a phrase: “always to pray *and not lose heart*.” Pity the one who loses heart in this world, who has little in life besides prayer and who is so discouraged that he or she is tempted to give up on that as well.

In C. S. Lewis’s beautiful little book *Reflections on The Psalms*, he sympathizes with the cry for justice which we so often hear in the Psalms. Consider the widow in this morning’s parable, for example. Lewis imagines her to have been unjustly deprived of a small strip of land:

The poor woman (Luke 18, 1-5) has had her little strip of land -- room for a pigsty or a hen-run -- taken away from her by a richer and more powerful neighbour.¹

She knows she has a perfectly watertight case. If she can get into court, she knows that she will be vindicated.

Ahh! But can she get into the court? In our land, judges do not take bribes in order to hear a case. Nor do their clerks or other administrators. But in the days of the Bible, bribery seems to have been common. The problem was not so much that the judge could be bribed to give an unjust verdict. No, Israel’s judges seem to have feared God or respected the laws of the land enough that they would not corrupt their judgment for the sake of ill-gotten gain. The issue was more simple: Could the plaintiff get a hearing in the first place?

Well, this poor woman had no money with which to oil the judicial machinery. So the judge refused to hear her case.

But the judge *must* hear her case, else she will lose heart. She is so very vulnerable. She is a widow, which means that she depends on the mercy of others. If she does not get justice in this case, she might well starve.

The judge, on the other hand, has tremendous power. His word goes. There were no juries; there were no courts of appeal. If she gets him to hear the case, her life will be saved. If not, her future looks grim.

So, she bangs on his door, and at last he relents and judges her case.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (A Harvest Book/Harcourt, Inc.: San Diego, 1958), pages 10-11.

Jesus would have us do the same thing: pray without ceasing, bang on heaven's door, and never give up, never lose heart.

Let me begin this discussion of prayer with a couple lines from Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson. Many of us have been praying from childhood, and it feels natural to us that we should do so. And it is indeed right that Christians should be people of prayer. Nonetheless, it is a stupendous thing we do when we pray. Jenson helps us to see this:

When we bring God our petitions, we presume to advise the Creator about how to order his universe...And when we bring God our praises, we presume things might have gone otherwise that they - happily - did.²

That was from a book Jenson wrote years ago.

This past summer, Carol and I heard a lecture by Jenson that again spoke of prayer. Jenson was discussing one of the classic attributes of God: his "omniscience." We believe that our God has complete knowledge, understanding, and awareness.

But if God is "omniscient" what is the point of our praying? How can our prayer teach him anything new? Psalm 139, for example, speaks most tenderly of the Lord's knowledge of us:

O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me! ²Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar. ³Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. (Psalm 139:1-4, RSV)

But if the Lord discerns my thoughts and knows them "even before a word is on my tongue," what is the point of my praying, for he knows both the world and my own heart better than I do? Is there anyway I can bring to his attention that he does not already know?

Furthermore, *dare* I to pray? Dare I advise God on how to run his universe? Might I not be thereby interfering with his well-laid plans?

But the thing is, Jesus urges prayer in this morning's parable as if it makes a difference to the world whether or not we pray. Jesus urges prayer most earnestly, as if reality is open to our petitions and praise. Just as the poor widow would have lost heart and her claim to justice if she had given up pleading with the judge, so we risk depriving ourselves if we give up our prayers. That is how Jesus seems to speak of prayer in this morning's Gospel Lesson.

² Robert W. Jenson, *A Large Catechism* (American Lutheran Publicity Bureau: Delhi, New York, 1999), page 30.

And not just here, but elsewhere too, Jesus urges prayer as if it makes a difference to the world. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught this:

⁷Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!
(Matthew 7:7-11, RSV)

So, Jesus would have us ask.

Likewise with St. Paul. He was a man of prayer, often assuring others of his prayers for them. And he urged prayer in all believers. For example, we have his exhortation from First Thessalonians:

¹⁵See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. ¹⁶Rejoice evermore. ¹⁷*Pray without ceasing.* ¹⁸In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. ¹⁹Quench not the Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 5:15-19, KJV)

In light of these Biblical exhortations toward prayer, Jenson's great theme is that if our world leaves little room for prayer, then we should rethink our world. We should even rethink God's omniscience.

One way to put the Gospel is this: reality is an adventure with a *good* outcome because it is centered in Jesus. Again, reality is an *adventure*. It is not a fixed thing. It is not a mere playing out of the deck. It is not an immense, but ultimately mindless, string of cause and effect. It is not some complex machine. It is a much more variable thing than that. It is more along the lines of Jesus, and the One he called his Father, and their Spirit, and you and me fighting with all our might to overcome sin, death, and the devil and thereby to bring in God's Kingdom.

Notice, I included you and me in this mighty battle. Our part is to live "in Christ." Our contribution to the universe is to learn of Jesus, conform ourselves to his will, seek to become evermore like him, bless our neighbors through showing forth his Spirit, and to *pray in his name*. And if we should grow old and can hardly do anything else, at least this we can do: We can fight on the side of the world by praying in the name of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, we should conceive of our prayers as contributing to God's omniscience! If we were praying in our name, without the Holy Spirit to intercede for us, then I doubt that there is much we could contribute to God's knowledge. But if we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, addressing our prayer to Our Father and

ending it in the name of Jesus, then our prayers become holy and important to God and therefore important to reality.

It is no waste of my time, for example, to inform God about the needs of this parish. And that is what I do. I pray as if the Lord needs to know about many people who are on my heart in this parish -- people going through sickness and heartaches that not everyone knows about, but which I know about and make my business to make sure God knows about them too.

This is what the Psalms do. They bring the concerns of the heart to God, in full assurance that it matters to the world whether or not they pray. The Psalms are sometimes joyful, sometimes desperate, but always carried along with the conviction that God needs to hear these things! If the Psalmist is suffering, he is determined to inform the Lord about it and to seek relief.

So it is with Jacob in this morning's First Lesson. Martin Luther loved this story about Jacob wrestling with God -- wrestling so hard that the Lord need to use an unusual wrestling move and to dislocate Jacob's thigh just to get away.

Luther says that that is how we should pray to God. We have heard the Gospel. We have heard the promise that Jesus is our Saviour and the heart of reality. Then pray in his name! Claim his promise. Build your arguments on his goodness. Cry out to God, as do the Psalms, that you want to see concrete evidence in your life of the Lord's goodness. You want to see the kind of goodness that will cause you to cry out in witness to the Lord:

¹⁶Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

¹⁷I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue.

¹⁸If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:

¹⁹But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer.

²⁰Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me. (Psalm 66:16-20, KJV)

Pray as did the Syrophenician woman for her daughter, refusing to depart from Jesus even if he withdraws from her into an inner room and then likens her to a dog. Listen to Luther about this determined woman:

Even if [Christ] hides Himself in a room in the house and does not want access to be given to anyone, do not draw back but follow. If He does not want to listen, knock at the door of the room; raise a shout! For this is the highest sacrifice, not to cease praying and seeking *until we conquer him*. He has already surrendered Himself to us so that we may be certain of victory, for He has bound Himself to His promises and pledged His faithfulness with an oath, saying (John 16:23): "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in My name." Likewise (Mark 16:16): "he who believes and is

baptized will be saved.” These promises will never disappoint you, unless you refuse to follow and seek. (LW 6, page 140)

When we pray, we pray we pray “in Christ.” We pray in the name of the One who suffered the sins and brutality of this world, died, and rose to life again to fight at our side. When we pray, we climb up onto the lap of Almighty God, call him Father, and we give him our advice about how to run the world, and we do so in the name of Jesus.

The final say is his, naturally, because he is the one with the wisdom and goodness to actually carry forward the battle for humanity. But pray earnestly to him, confident that, like any good father or mother, he will take seriously your request and work it out according to his wisdom. Jesus urges us to pray and to “never lose heart,” and that is how we should pray, in his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.