

Restful Prayer

22nd Sunday after Pentecost; Series C

Luke 18:1-8

Wrestling with God to bring a word of blessing. I can recall the first term of my first year in the Seminary. I was just twenty-three years old. I was sitting in a class titled, "Introduction to the Pastoral Ministry." The professor was giving us some introductory thoughts about the pastor's task of preaching. To aid him in his little talk, he drew our attention to the story of Jacob wrestling with God, just as our attention was drawn to that story this morning. For hours Jacob wrestled with this man who later called himself God. Jacob's hip was put out of joint and yet Jacob still persevered. He was determined and persistent. This man tells Jacob to let him go but Jacob responds with these words, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen 32:26). Upon saying these words, this man who is recognized as God then blesses Jacob, even changing his name from Jacob to Israel, meaning "He strives with God." Wrestling with God for a word of blessing. Our professor then suggested that this is what pastors do as they prepare sermons—they wrestle with the Word of God in order to bring a word of blessing for their people.

I tell you all of this because pastors are not the only Christians that wrestle with the Word of God in order to receive a blessing. With their own words all Christians wrestle with the Word of God, the truth of God, in prayer. We wrestle with our own words as we seek to understand God's Word and Will and express it in prayer. We wrestle with our words and give them to God. Many times we pray for a blessing.

There is another Seminary experience that I would like to recall. This experience also took place in a classroom. Yet it was during my final year at the Seminary. We were talking about the task of interpreting the Bible. The professor said this, "We should be asking the questions of a particular passage of the Bible that the particular passage wants to answer." In other words, what questions does the Bible reading raise? Deal with those. As we wrestle with our Gospel reading this morning and "mine" it for a word of blessing, I would like to suggest that there is a question about prayer that wants to be answered. "How should we pray when we wrestle with our words in prayer to God?"

There is a lot going on now for which we can pray. We can pray for our own lives. We can pray for our congregation. We can pray for the health of others. We can pray for our family and their health. We can pray for our jobs and financial situations. We can pray for our country. We can pray for situations in other countries—Syria, Kenya, etc. But *how* should we pray when we present these petitions and requests to God? Our Gospel reading wants to weigh in on that question.

There are at least two answers that we can arrive at that are true, but only partially true. We will call them incomplete answers. The first is that we ought to pray with great expectations. We ought to pray to God with positive thinking, expecting the results for which we pray—that is our hope of receiving them. This answer might lead to something called the "prosperity gospel." The "prosperity gospel" follows the line of thought that God wants to bless us and give us nice things, we just need to ask for them in the right way. There was a book that was popular some years back called *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne that suggested that "the secret" to a successful life is positive thinking. If you think positive thoughts, good, positive things will happen. Research has showed us that there is some truth to this claim. The Apostle Paul even says in his letter to the Philippians, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is

just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think* about these things” (Phil 4:8, emphasis, mine).

But if the proper prayer posture depends upon our right frame of mind, doesn't that assume that our trust in God, of which prayer is a great expression, rests somewhat upon our own reason, ability, and strength? Yet, we know that our prayer rests upon God's will not our own. Furthermore, what about when we pray in weakness? What about when we pray to God and have a conversation with him in anger? What about when our prayer is likened more to wrestling with God? An answer of “how we ought to pray?” that calls us primarily to be positive and believe that what we ask for will come true, can be misleading and uncomfortable. There must be a more complete answer.

A second incomplete answer to the question, “How ought we pray?” suggests that we need the right words to pray. How often we ourselves might shy away from praying privately or in front of others because we don't think that we can pray with eloquence. God's servant Moses even thought this way, suggesting to God in the Book of Exodus that he could not be used by God because of lack of eloquent speech. Yet, through the Apostle Peter God simply calls us to pray by “casting all our anxieties upon him because he cares for us.” (1 Pet 5:7). Elsewhere, God uses the Apostle Paul to remind us to “not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). Finally, Jesus warned his own disciples against praying the way the Pharisees and Scribes do, with long, verbose prayers said often as an attempt to gain the attention and approval of others (Mk 12:38-44; Lk 20:47). Though formal prayers that express our thoughts in an organized way are good prayers that are heard by our Heavenly Father, we do not need to think that we must have the “right words” in order to pray to God.

When considering the question, “How should we pray?” it is an incomplete answer to think that we need the right frame of mind and/or the right words in order to pray. Rather, to get at the answer that the Gospel reading wants to give us, perhaps it is best to consider who we are and who God is when we pray to him. I invite you to join me in looking at pg. 323 in the *Lutheran Service Book*. There we find a copy of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*. In Luther's words to the “Introduction” of the Lord's Prayer, he reminds us that we are God's children and he is our Heavenly Father. Thus, when we pray to God, we are invited tenderly “to believe that he is our true Father and we are his true children, *so that* with all boldness and confidence we may ask him as dear children ask their dear father.”

In the Gospel reading we receive some insider information as readers that we don't always receive when we read about the life and work of Jesus in the four Biblical Gospels. In the first verse of the reading we learn the precise purpose for the parable that Jesus tells. He told the parable *so that* his disciples *always pray and never lose heart* (Lk 18:1). As dear children with their dear father, Jesus would have us *always praying, always trusting all things* to our Heavenly Father. He would not have us concerned so much about the words or the frame of mind. He does not want anything to discourage us. Nothing should discourage us from living out our trust in God through a life of prayer. He would have us always praying without being discouraged or losing heart.

Jesus longs for us to always pray without losing heart or becoming discouraged because he knows that prayer is rest. In prayer we rest our worries and anxieties. We give our cares about our family, friends, health, job, domestic politics, foreign politics, and church over to the only one who has always promised to hear them (1 Jn 5:14-15). Jesus himself says, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). We can truly rest our bodies

and souls and all things in prayer to God without becoming discouraged or losing heart because in Christ God has purchased true rest for you. Just as the woman in the parable persevered to receive a just verdict from an unjust judge, so also the sinless Son of God persevered and prevailed upon our God of justice with his own life in order to purchase a verdict of innocence for you. He did this in order to purchase true, eternal rest from your Sin, your worries, your anxieties. And now we have the privilege “to carry everything to God in prayer,” as the hymn writer tells us (*LSB 770*), without worrying about the right words and proper posture. Through Jesus and in the name of Jesus, even as we wrestle with our words we rest in our God through prayer. Amen.