Text: Luke 18:1-8

**Introduction**

If you aren’t a baseball fan I’m sorry, but there are some long prayers being answered this year. Number 5 San Diego is meeting number 6 Philadelphia for the National League Championship. And San Diego is doing it by beating both New York and LA. Of course the Evil Empire powered by a Judge is still out there, and Houston less trash can, so not all justice is being granted.

**Text**

Let me ask this question: how is your prayer life? What metaphor would you use to describe it?

In preparing the service and the sermon it struck me how divergent the biblical pictures are from the hymn tradition. In the hymns out there is every pastor’s favorite hymn to hate on, the original Jesus my Boyfriend song, “In the Garden”. He walks with me and talks we me.

The hymn we opened with doesn’t have the same cringe-y subtext, but it uses the same metaphor. Prayer as a gentle conversation. There is a stately serenity to its picture mixed with childlike innocence. “With care our Father listens…”. Father knows best.

And I’m not here to completely trash that hymn tradition. The metaphor it uses for prayer is very Sunny Side Up American. And it isn’t without biblical warrant. It’s greatest support would probably come from how Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer itself. If you might recall that scene the disciples of Jesus are feeling a little subpar. People are comparing their Rabbi Jesus to John the Baptist and as Jesus would summarize later John came playing the dirge. All the serious people take the dirge much more seriously. The son of man came eating and drinking, and they think he’s frivolous. So the disciples of the frivolous rabbi go to Jesus and say “John taught his disciples to pray would you teach us?” And you can hear the accusation being passed along in the request, but Jesus responds with the Lord’s Prayer and another parable to the effect that you don’t need to pile up words. Your Father does know best. He knows what you need before you ask, so just ask. And he does delight to hear the requests of his children, or to spend time with them. I think Luther’s explanation to the Lord’s Prayer capture this in a way. The Kingdom of God certainly comes without our prayer, but we pray that it comes to us also. The picture of prayer is the gentle conversation carried along by communion with the Holy Spirit.

But compare that picture to what I think is the much deeper and stronger biblical tradition. In our Old Testament lesson today the metaphor is wrestling. and this isn’t the High School wrestling meet with a referee to stop illegal holds, points scored all on a mat. This is existential. Jacob is returning after a long time away to his home. And if you remember this story, Jacob left after he stole the blessing of his father from his brother Esau with the help of his mother Rebekah. In the intervening time Esau has become a great person. Jacob sends his two wife’s and all their kids and everything he’s stolen from Laban his uncle, who he is fleeing because he cheated him…he send his family further on, thinking that he’s going to give them the space to keep running when Esau shows up to exact his revenge. Jacob is between the rock of Laban and the Hard Place of Esau and his entire life as the trickster is catching up to him. And it is in that situation the stranger shows up and they wrestle all night. There is no trickery here. No selling a birth-right for a pot of stew. No dressing up in lamb’s wool to pretend to be hairy Esau. No simple breeding genetics so that all the herd comes out with spots leaving your uncle with nothing out of bet. Jacob latches on for dear life. I won’t let you go until you bless me. Even through the dislocation of his hip, which the bible elsewhere would say continues with him after this night, Jacob holds on.

Prayer as wrestling with God. Prayer as something that marks you for life. Prayer as Jacob says, “I have seen God face to face.” Jacob receives his blessing, but it isn’t exactly what he thought he was after. He receives his assurance, but it isn’t gentle. Nor is it exactly complete. “Please, tell me your name?...Why is it that you ask my name?” Jacob guesses correctly, but God still remains something of a stranger.

Jesus uses a different metaphor. And let’s first take it simply, which I think we need to do because that is what the evangelist Luke says at the start. “he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Jesus’ metaphor here isn’t the Father, nor is it a conversation. Jesus’ metaphor is an unjust judge and widow. Jesus’ metaphor is someone who hold all the power and someone who is completely powerless. Jesus’ metaphor is asking someone whose only care is that you would just go away. And his point is that even if you have such an unjust judge and such an unjust power dynamic. – And let me pause for a second here, this is exactly what our culture keeps harping about, unjust power structures, structures that privilege some at the expense of others. – Even if this is the reality of God and man, you can still get justice by wearing the power down. Prayer, petitions of the power, can work. Not in the gentle conversation. Not in persuasion. The unjust judge is not persuaded or in the least moved. Petitions can work by annoyance.

Now I can understand why such metaphors are hard for the hymnwriters. They aren’t the stuff of song.

But there are other biblical episodes that I think are quite similar. Abraham’s conversation with God over Sodom and Gomorrah is far from gentle as Abraham navigates the power dynamic. “Don’t be angry with me over one more, but what if there are only 10 righteous people?....” Jesus himself In the Garden is far from a serene scene as his sweat falls as drops of blood. And those he is with can’t keep watch a single hour let alone wrestle through the night. The prayer of the litany captures it in the line “by your agony and bloody sweat.” And even the Apostle Paul’s image of the Holy Spirit interceding for us might not be as calm as we take it. Sitting here in October approaching Halloween, one might think of it more as possession. This flesh is too much like those disciples in the garden, so the Holy Spirit takes possession and prays for us. Now it is the Holy Spirit who intends the best for us. But even Jacob – now named Israel – leaves limping when he sees God.

Yet the prayers of his people are the bowls of incense before the heavenly altar. The supplications, desperate utterances, calls to a stranger, and yes, even the childlike trust to a Good Father who does know best, are the pleasing aroma before God.

**Application**

So how can we reconcile the images. Or how do we reconcile the metaphors we like about our prayer lives, and the ones the bible uses?

Let me suggest a couple of things. The first is that our wrestling, our perception of a great power chasm, is more about us than it is about God. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak Jesus would tell his disciples in the garden. The first thing we wrestle against in our prayer lives is not God, but our own sinful nature. Whether that is simply doubt that prayer does anything, to our unwillingness to be serious about prayer, prayer is tough for this flesh. Jesus’ metaphor of the unjust judge is instructive toward that doubt. Oh, you think thoughts and prayers are meaningless? Look at your own history. Enough people just asking will inspire a response. Even by your material standards prayer is meaningful. We haven’t yet gotten to the fact that we don’t fight flesh and blood, but powers and principalities. Likewise, taking Jacob as an instructional story, there comes a time when we have to stop living by the seat of our pants. “Jesus take the wheel” is a completely appropriate prayer. Call it the basic cry of possession by the Spirit. Something similar to “we admitted we were powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable.” But the day comes when we have to make amends. In regards to prayer we have to send the family and everything to safety. We have to make preparation. Our prayer life must become more intentional. Because the flesh is weak, we have to learn to prop it up in some ways. The best being making prayer a habit.

But let me end on what I think is a deeper meaning of Jesus’ parable. I think he is arguing from the lessor to the greater. The lessor is something we are familiar with. Power divides and being powerless. Unjust judges. Being able to wear people down through persistence and annoyance. These are truths of the flesh. “I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.” Even the most cynical amongst us would agree with this. Heck, this is basically the entire point of the Saul Alinsky’s Rules for Radicals. But Jesus isn’t arguing that God is an unjust judge. God is the greater, something that we might have very little experience with – a just judge. And if petitions work even with an unjust judge, how much more will they work with one who cares about doing the job?

“Will not God give justice to his elect? Who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?”

The answer is the implied, “hell, no.” God is not the unjust judge, but God is the Father of Jesus Christ. “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” The Father of Jesus Christ is such that even in the middle of the most unjust thing your can imagine – the innocent being crucified – the one being crucified hands his spirit, his soul, his entire case, over to the Father. At the point of greatest power discrepancy, Jesus takes his case to His Father. And the Father raises him.

Your prayers are not taken to an unjust judge, but something far greater. The Father of Jesus Christ.

Never-the-less, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

How is your prayer life?