

March 29, 2020

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Genesis 32:24-30 and Luke 18:1-7

I'd wager most people who pray are familiar with the feeling of a "one-sided prayer." When we lift something up in prayer and we don't feel like anything's hearing us. It just feels like our words are drifting away, lost in space. And all those times we pray and we don't get an answer. That thing we long for so much we asked *God* for it... doesn't happen.

In this time of waiting, in our homes in isolation, *waiting* for the storm to pass and things to be *better*, *patience* has become the name of the game—but our reading for today was about a little bit more than just waiting around for God to get His act together. They're about *wrestling* with God.

Our first story, from Genesis, is about Jacob—grandson of Abraham and a forefather of the Jewish people—spending an entire night in a literal wrestling match with God until daybreak. Now, obviously, if you fight God you're never gonna kick God's butt. The omnipotent creator and sovereign of all reality is a little out of our weight-class. What Jacob did that was admirable was he hung in there. He may not have kept calm, but he carried on. He pushed, and he struggled, and even when he was injured—in immense pain—he didn't let go until he felt God's blessing.

Our story from Luke is a little less physical. Jesus tells us of a widow, in that world a silent figure from the fringes of society, faced with injustice and hardship, who confronts an aloof authority figure, seeking the wrongs in her life righted. Now this particular judge was a pretty bad example of a person, let alone an authority figure. Yet, despite all the signs telling the widow she wasn't gonna get anything out of him, she kept striving for justice. And in the end, no doubt as exhausted as Jacob, she achieved the blessing she sought.

Jesus tells us that if an authority figure as disrespectful and amoral as the judge from Luke 18 will grant justice to one of the least of us because of her persistence and faith—even just to get her to stop bothering him—just *imagine* what the God of all creation, who actually *cares* about us, loves us, and is a far more righteous figure than *that* sleazeball... just imagine what God would do if we showed the same persistence as the widow.

There's a story about Albert Einstein, the famous physicist who fled Hitler's Germany and found refuge in America. For a while, one of the greatest minds of all time was living in New Jersey, coming up with earth-shattering scientific insights and hosting visits with other renowned thinkers and important individuals.

Now, a ten-year-old girl named Emmy heard that a very kind man who knew a lot about mathematics had moved into her neighborhood. Since Emmy was having some

difficulty with her fifth-grade arithmetic, she decided to visit the man down the block and see if he would help her with her problems. Einstein was very willing and he explained everything to her so that she could easily understand it. He also told her she was welcome to come and knock on his front door whenever she encountered a problem that was too difficult.

A few weeks later, Emmy's mother learned from one of her neighbors that Emmy was often seen entering the house of the world-famous physicist. When she asked Emmy about it, the girl admitted it was so. "Why, Emmy!" the mother exclaimed. "Professor Einstein is a very important man! His time is very valuable! He can't be bothered with the problems of a little schoolgirl."

Then Emmy's mother rushed over to Einstein's house and knocked on the door. When Einstein answered the door, she was so flustered at the sight of the famous lined face, the kindly eyes, and the familiar mane of unruly white hair, that she could only stammer incoherently.

After a few moments, understanding dawned on Einstein's face. "Ah! I think I understand. You're Emmy's mother, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said, sighing in embarrassment, "and I'm so sorry she's been coming over here and bothering you!"

"Bothering me! Ach, no!" he laughed. "Why, when a child finds such joy in learning, then it is my joy to help her learn! Please don't stop Emmy from coming to me with her school problems. She is welcome in this house anytime."

The God that we know is a bit more like Einstein than the disrespectful judge. In God we have someone who actually cares about our pains and our needs. In God we have someone who is more than willing to hear our troubles and work with us to solve them.

Now we all know God isn't a fairy godmother either. We can pray all we want for a global pandemic to end *tomorrow*, or for that winning lottery ticket... and as I'm sure we've all experienced, those wishes aren't always granted the way we want them to be. For some reason, that's just not the way God works.

But many of us here *have* experienced answered prayer. We know what it feels like when something we have longed for finally comes to pass—a gift, a blessing. Unfortunately there isn't a hard-and-fast way to figure out which prayers get answered which ways and why. There's no scientific method to explain prayer, or the workings of God for that matter. Sorry, Einstein.

But one thing I can tell you, Einstein didn't just up and do Emmy's homework for her. And she didn't get better at arithmetic from one visit with the world's greatest mathematician either. She had to keep going back to him, working with him. Showing him her problems and working through them together. No doubt she had to struggle with a lot of the things he said to her or tried to show her. She probably faced a few more rough test scores too, and debated whether all this effort reaching out to that funny old man was a waste of time.

The widow from Jesus' story in Luke had to do her fair share of struggling as well. She had to keep returning to the judge, pushing through what was undoubtedly a thick wall of bureaucratic red tape every time, to call out to this figure on high who didn't seem to care much one way or another what happened to her. She probably faced ridicule from others, and plenty of hardship along the way as her life slowly crumbled beneath her.

And Jacob, on a treacherous journey with his family, wrestled with God for hours on end, desperately seeking a blessing to protect him and his loved ones on their way. Sweat pouring down him from the exertion, his lungs burning, his joints giving way and the pain making it hard even to walk, Jacob continued to wrestle with God.

And through his struggle, through his refusal to ever give up, Jacob found his blessing.

Through the widow's perseverance in seeking justice, and her repeated petitions that her case be heard, she received the justice she sought.

And the story doesn't say, but I'm willing to bet that Emmy ended up kicking her math final's butt. Of course she got an A, she had Einstein helping her after all.

It's a whole other sermon to say that God's time is not our time, and it's a whole other platitude to say "God works in mysterious ways" and that our prayers aren't always answered the way we thought they would be. I think you already know that anyway.

What I'm saying, and what our Scripture lessons are telling us today, is that prayer isn't just a wish we send up hoping that it might get answered, and it isn't just something we ask for and wait for it to come to pass. Jacob and the widow from Luke give us the example that prayer is more about striving for something. That a healthy prayer life and a healthy relationship with God involves its fair share of struggle.

In prayer, we are called to wrestle with God. We shouldn't feel ashamed of asking God for something we need, or bringing our pains and sorrows before something who has bigger issues on their plate. Prayer isn't just mailing in a request and hoping God gets around to it. The widow shows us that it's okay to keep pressing the issue. To keep coming before the great big authority figure with the problems that are big to us. Jacob shows us that sometimes we have to grab on tight, to grunt and scream and rage against the God that put

us here and not give up until we have an answer, a blessing, *something* that will satisfy our need.

And ten-year-old Emmy reminds us that God actually cares. That no matter how much we have to wrestle, or prod, or beg, or suffer without respite, the biggest mind out there actually does have time for us, and answers the door with a kindly smile.

Prayer—prayer that has an impact on our lives—is not easy. It takes persistence. It takes endurance. It takes swallowing our pride and coming back again and again trying to find a different answer. But as weak as we are, as hobbled and pained as the world can make us, we always have what it takes to wrestle with God. We just have to find it, grasp it, hold on tight, and never let go.

Thanks be to God. Amen.