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Luke 18:1-8
 Genesis 32:22-31
 Psalm 121
 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5

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 The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

If I titled my sermons, this one would be called, "The Problem with Thoughts and Prayers."

We will get to the core of that problem in a moment. But, to set up the dilemma at hand, let's look at our texts this morning. Take notice of the action that is happening in both our Hebrew text (our first reading) and in our Gospel.

What is Jacob doing in the reading from Genesis? He is wrestling with God. I imagine him sweaty and hot, his breathing labored, his muscles fatigued. Determined and undeterred. Jacob demands a blessing and takes deliberate, bold action to claim what he needs.

Now, what is the widow doing in the parable Jesus tells his disciples? She is demanding justice. I imagine her calm and steadfast, unflinching in her truth, squaring her shoulders until she is seen and heard and answered. She persists with unwavering conviction until justice is given.

Would you describe Jacob and the widow as passive characters in these stories? Absolutely not. Are they asking for thoughts and prayers, for kind sentiments of polite acknowledgement? Or, are they fighting courageously for the change they desperately need?

Here's a little insight into the answer to those questions...To give you an idea of the depth of the widow's fighting spirit (and I absolutely love this insight) notice what the judge says about her. The judge says if he doesn't answer her plea that she will come and wear him out. What he is actually saying is that she might literally beat him up...give him a black eye. The Greek word that is used, "hypopiazō" literally means to beat black and blue and it was a term often associated with boxing. In other words, the widow was a scrappy lady and she wasn't about to go quietly.

Both Jacob and the widow demanded more than well wishes of thoughts and prayers. And, not only did they demand something more and they were willing to put in their own work to get it accomplished.

This past week in our Liturgy Study, we focused on the power of prayer and how our liturgy every single Sunday brings into the forefront the difference between simply wishing someone "thoughts and prayers" and the life-changing work of participatory commitment to the answering of prayer.

Let me read you one of the quotes we considered...

“To pray for the need of another person, or for the solution of a problem in our nation or community [or family], involves Christians allowing themselves to be the instruments of God’s action; to pray without holding ourselves ready to act in the matter for which we pray is less than Christian prayer.”

Let me sum that up...if we pray for a solution, we can’t just sit around waiting for God to wave a magic wand. We must be ready to act with deliberate, bold and persistent faithfulness, to use the knowledge God has given us to bring about the change for which we pray.

Just offering thoughts and prayers alone is less than Christian prayer. Christian prayer is like Jacob wrestling with God. Christian prayer is like the widow never giving up until change happens. Or as another quote from our study states...

“The point of intercessory prayer (asking for change or for God’s intervention) is not so much to change God or direct God to something God does not know, but to change us: to make us people who, after prayer for those who suffer and struggle, go out into the world to be God’s answer to our prayer, caring for the sick and suffering, supporting those in leadership, and entering into the healing of the world, in God’s name.”

We are God’s action.

Thoughts and prayers alone are in essence saying we put the entire burden on God or on someone else to do the work, to mend what is broken, to heal those who are sick, to stand up for those who have been abused. That’s not to say those prayers aren’t important...they are! Because we are to pray for God’s help. But, those kind of prayers are only part of what we are called to do as Christians.

When fully understood, our scripture readings this morning provide for us a model for prayer that is active and dynamic, that puts us as individuals at the heart of change that we seek. And, at times that means we have to be relentless. Remember the widows fighting spirit.

Theologian Dorothee Soelle says that this experience of active, dynamic prayer does not lead *“to a new vision of God but a different relationship to the world—one that has borrowed the eyes of God.”*

We might add that this kind of active, dynamic prayer also borrows the hands of God. We start to see the world as God desires it to be. We start to love the world the way God loves the world. And, we begin to act as God would have us act to bring about that new vision; to be the answer to prayers.

The problem with thoughts and prayers is that it simply isn’t enough. We can’t stop with just those words. We have to put on that fighting spirit and wrestle for the change that we seek. We are to keep calling on God and calling on ourselves to see as God sees, to act as God would act, to love and God would love. That is true Christian prayer. Amen.