

Devotions for the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost, October 20-24, 2022

Monday of Pentecost 19 – Prayer of the Week

O Lord, almighty and everlasting God, You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear us. Mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may direct and govern our hearts in all things that we may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“I will pray for you,” she said. It was the day I was installed to be the pastor in the parish. She made me a promise that day. I have never forgotten it and I have never doubted that she meant it. She prayed for me. There were many times when I faced a difficult call or hard decision and I thought about her promise to me. I knew that there was someone who was praying for me, and I knew that there was someone who was listening to that prayer.

I was a younger child in a large household. All my elder siblings went off to boarding high schools in the old LCMS system. Many of them worked on my uncle’s farm all summer long. They spent most of the year away from home. Every night, after dinner, my father led us as we prayed for the members of our home who were not with us. I know that every night after dinner, after I left home, my parents included me in those prayers as long as they lived. God being timeless, still hears those prayers on my behalf and I treasure them.

We pray in this prayer that the Holy Spirit would direct and govern our hearts in all things so we may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of God’s name. That is a mouthful. There is a lot going on in that sentence, all of which is worthy of our consideration. But I would contend that one of the most important things He directs and governs our hearts to do is pray. If you are not in the habit of prayer, start that habit today. It will take a couple of weeks to establish. At first you will feel a little self-conscious about it. Do it anyway. You won’t regret it. God will be listening to you. Someone else may be depending on it.

Tuesday of Pentecost 19 – Genesis 32:22-30

²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?”

And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

My friend had heard the call to ministry when he was a young man. Several in his extended family had answered that call and attended seminary or taught in Lutheran schools. But it was a difficult time to become a pastor. There were many tensions in the Synod, and he did not want to wade into the disputes which had erupted even within his own family. He pursued another career. It was a blessing to him. He married, raised a family, and was nearing retirement. But in the back of his head was that still and small voice of a call to serve. He retired a little early and enrolled in the seminary. Today he serves a parish.

God wrestles with Jacob in this reading. What is most interesting to me about this passage is that God does not prevail. He does not pin Jacob in a moment, as I might expect God to do. Or does God win? He does not win the wrestling match, but he may have gotten what he was really after all along. If you read the chapters before this event, Jacob consistently refers to “the Lord, the God of my father” or “the Lord your God.” He never utters the words, “the Lord my God.” After this moment, when He gives Jacob a new name, Israel, Jacob always refers to the Lord as “my God.”

Here is one of the strange mysteries of God and His love for us. He does not force but He powerfully loves us. That strange and gentle love of God calls and does not give up on us, but slowly and surely cajoles and convinces us. Soon, we are no longer the person who says no, but we have become someone with a yes to speak to Him. Like Jacob, I think all of us have wrestled with God at times. Know that God plays a long game with us. Your resistance and wrestling with God are not going to put Him off. He is a persistent lover, a God who is not driven away. His love is too strong for that. He doesn’t need to win the wrestling match. He wants to embrace you in His loving arms.

Wednesday of Pentecost 19 – Psalm 121

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

From his hospital room we could see Mt. Hood looming over the Portland metro area. It was a crystal-clear day, so the lines of snow and rock were sharply defined. Portland is built on the flanks of a rather large and not entirely dormant volcano. I used to remind my students of that whenever they were tempted, as we all are, to write divine justice instead of divine mercy into their theology papers. Would they be so glib about justice when they remembered the many sins of our city and the immediate expediency of a massive volcano nearby. Have you ever heard about Pompeii?

This day as we looked out the window, we were lifting our eyes to the hills and looking for help, mercy, and rescue. We remembered the last words of this Psalm which we speak at baptisms. He had been baptized and God had made him this promise: The LORD will keep your going out and coming in from this time forth and even forever more. He will keep your life.

My friend was in some pain, pain which the drugs did not entirely stop. Or perhaps he did not want to be so drugged. He longed for his Keeper, his shade on the right hand who would not allow sun or moon to strike him. He had that Keeper. His Keeper did not sleep, never took a break, needed no break. His Keeper is the eternal God.

A few days later I sat in that room and prayed with his family in the presence of the body of their husband and father. He had died. But this was not a failure of his Keeper, far from it. The LORD had watched his final going out and his entrance into heavenly bliss, just as he had watched over his first day of kindergarten, his wedding day, his retirement party, and every day of His servant's life. He had made a promise in that baptismal water. We looked to the hills and found the mercy we needed. It was always there.

Thursday of Pentecost 19 – II Timothy 3:14-4:5

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they

will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

I have been given a chance to teach a general education theology class at the University of Portland, a local Roman Catholic institution. I had gotten to know the department chair there when we had similar duties. He needed some help a few years ago, and I had the time. It was good to be back in a classroom like that again. It still is good to be in a room full of students again, talking about the most important things in the world.

Like any general education class, there are always a few who do not want to be there. This is a class they must take in order to get their degree, and they see it as a hurdle to jump over and then leave behind. I probably thought the same way about some of my college classes. In fact, as I write this line, my basic chemistry class comes to mind. But there are some, a gratifying number in fact, who are really engaged in my class. One can see it in their eyes and hear it in the questions they ask.

Paul tells us that days are coming in which people will have itching ears only to hear what they want to hear. They will find teachers who will suit their own passions. We hear a great deal about various agendas which are being taught in schools today which seem to fit that bill. I am glad to see that there are some whose ears yearn to hear this Word of God. We may be in those times in which people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but praise God that he has kept for himself a remnant of people who hear the Shepherd's voice and listen to Him.

Friday of Pentecost 19 – Luke 18:1-8

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

I was in a hospital room not long ago with a parishioner. We were talking when the nurse came in. She checked his blood pressure, his respiration, his blood-oxygen saturation, and listened to his heart. She was recording his vital signs, the signs of life. Medical professionals do this all the time.

Did you know that faith also has at least one vital sign? It is prayer. For faith is the relationship which Jesus describes as like a father and child, a vine and branches, a shepherd and sheep, and more. Faith is not an idea or a virtue which we have. Faith is what we are in Christ. I am a child of God. I am a branch connected to the vine and from it I draw my life. I am a sheep in the care of this great good Shepherd Jesus. And just as I am alive and that means my heart beats and my

lungs draw air, so too I am a child who comes his father and speaks, asks, and praises. A child who never speaks to his father has no father. A sheep which is never seen by nor sees the shepherd is not of that fold. A Christian who never prays is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

Jesus encourages us to pray, and not lose heart. God is not like this corrupt judge, but He is a kind and good father who listens to his children. Even the corrupt judge can be badgered into doing something. God wants to do something for you. God will give the justice speedily. So, pray. Jesus wonders what the vital signs will be upon his return.