

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved. And will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cried to Him day and night?

The first time I prayed to God with any kind of seriousness, that moment in your life when you move from saying prayers like “Now I lay me down to sleep” to actually praying for something with earnestness, I was 11 years old and my grandfather, Thomas Danaher, who was the surgeon in a small town and was a great man who had been instrumental in building up the hospital that is there to this day, for bringing in things like x-rays, he was going in for surgery. It was 1976 and he had an aneurysm on his aorta. And not only was my grandfather a great man in a small town, he was also the classic pater familia. He kind of held together our extended family. Loaning money when people needed money, helping people get help through a connection he had when people needed help, bailing people out of jail when they needed to be bailed out of jail, and generally holding our family together, a fragile family together.

And sometimes, the person that he loaned money to and help through a connection and bailed out of jail was the same person, it was my dad. So Thomas Danaher played a major role in my life. And when he was going in to his surgery, I went into his hospital room and he sat up in bed and he kissed me on the cheek, and I smelled the Old Spice that he was wearing and he talked to me about blood and how after the operation they had to manage his blood so that it didn't clot too quickly.

And then, we went away. And the next day while he was in surgery I was praying to God fervently. And I felt this divine energy around me and it was a sunny day, and I remember looking up and closing my eyes and letting the sun hit my face. And I was convinced that when I would get home that I would hear good news. And as I walked from school to my grandparents' house, which is what I did every day, I saw all of these cars parked in front of the house. And I went in and my father greeted me and he wept, which I had never seen him do. And he told me that my grandfather Pop had died.

Now I knew that bad things would follow from his death. And everything that I sensed even as an 11-year-old came true. Our family was never the same. People went in ways they shouldn't have gone, and the whole family structure shattered. And five years later, I found myself praying again; a prayer of desperation. I was 16 years old, I was experiencing depression and suicidality and I was hoping against hope that somehow God would hear my prayer and somehow be present in my life.

And this time, God showed up. I experienced the divine energy. I experienced a sense of being beloved and my life was immediately changed for the better. My depression lifted. I

discovered things about myself I didn't know, gifts that I didn't know I had and I'm sure that I'm here today because God answered that prayer.

Now I have begun with these two stories because the topic that I want to speak about today is prayer. And more specifically, the kind of prayer that I want to speak about today is the prayer of supplication or intercession. Supplication in which we are begging God for something. And intercession in which we are begging God to get involved in the life of another person, somehow to keep them safe or to preserve them from falling or to somehow help them prosper.

And this topic runs throughout our scriptures. In our reading from Genesis, there is a moment in which Jacob who has cheated his brother out of his birthright is making his way home to apologize to him and to try to reconcile. And Jacob, as he is making his way, sends his family across the river and then he sits on the side and is attacked by an angel who he wrestles for the night. And then the angel touches his hip and puts it out of joint, and he limps for the rest of his life. And in the process, Jacob receives a new name, Israel, which is Hebrew for one who wrestles with God.

And this has always been a metaphor for prayer. And particularly, for prayers of supplication and intercession, of moments in which we are praying for God's presence in a difficult circumstance. And I suppose the first lesson that this passage teaches us, as a preacher once said is that in order for us to learn anything from this passage, we learn that you only trust the person who limps. Those are the people who know what it's like to trust God in the midst of some devastation. And those are the people who know and trust God to be more than a fixer of our problems but someone who is willing to be present at our deepest moments of pain.

Because when it comes to prayer, there are many people that are going to tell you all sorts of things, will try to convince you that there's a technique that you have not heard of that will somehow help you achieve all of your deepest desires. But prayer, even in the midst of those prayers when we are begging and we are asking God to be present, prayer will always be a relationship, whether God chooses to show up in the way that we expect God to show up or whether we are left limping and walking into an identity we don't yet know fully.

In our reading from the gospel of Mark, Jesus tells a parable about an unjust judge and we are right to see in this a kind of summary of all that Jesus has been speaking of in the gospel of Luke. In many ways, the gospel of Luke is a kind of primer about prayer. Early on in the first chapter of Luke, the prophet Zechariah receives an announcement from the angel Gabriel that tells him that his prayers have been answered. And his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, would give birth to a child named John.

And in chapters two and three, Jesus is constantly praying and constantly experiencing the presence of God because of His prayer. When He is baptized in the River Jordan, Jesus prays and the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice from Heaven says to Him, "You are

my beloved.” Jesus later teaches the disciples to pray, giving them the Our Father, a prayer that we continue to pray at every organized worship we do.

And then we come to this teaching about the need to be persistent in prayer and to never despair, that our prayer will be heard in heaven. And right after this, just a few short chapters later, we meet Jesus in the garden when, according to some accounts, He is sweating blood because of the stress. And Jesus prays, “Father, if this cup cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” Jesus Himself is praying a prayer of supplication, a prayer of intercession as He goes to His death. And the comfort that this gospel wants us to know is that God hears our prayers and God's justice is indeed coming, and that you and I need to trust God even in those moments where God seems to be absent.

For in the parable we read today, the main point of the parable is what is unsaid. In that parable, there is an absence of empathy. The judge gives justice to the widow because He is simply tired of her. She has worn him out. There is no empathy, there is no care in the judge's decision. And by that absence of empathy, you and I are to imagine an infinity of empathy that comes when God hears our prayer.

George Herbert, the great Anglican poet and preacher, he once said in one of his poems that prayer is like reverse thunder. So just in the way that thunder can startle us and surprise us and come out of nowhere and scare the dog, so in Heaven would you and I pray, particularly in moments in which we are begging and which we are asking, and hoping and wishing that it's as if thunder has sounded in heaven. And he comes to that teaching by way of passages like today's gospel because we can only imagine with images as powerful as thunder that God hears us and is with us, particularly when we need some kind of intervention, some kind of presence.

Now Christianity has a very distinctive teaching about prayer. It's a teaching that is often obscured and it has been all but lost in western Christianity and it is key. And the first point of this teaching is that the height of our prayers are not prayers in which we don't ask God for anything because we are afraid of being selfish, but actually our intercessions and our supplications are the height of prayer. They define all of the other prayers we experience come in that relationship with God. Why? Because now that Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended to Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God, Jesus is bringing our prayers to God.

Jesus is not the vice president of Heaven, kind of waiting for God to get a little tired. Jesus is actually continually interceding for us so that the prayers that you speak come through Jesus' mouth to God. That's what John Calvin wrote, [inaudible 15:53] our prayers come right through the mouth of Jesus. And they come not only right through Jesus to God, but all prayer – and this brings me to the second point – all prayer begins in God because prayer is a kind of love language in which words have meaning and are active.

And so prayer is an echo of the words God has already spoken to us. So that when God said, “Let there be light,” and that word was active and created something, and there was

light and it was good, so our prayers are returned, an echo of that meaningful word that comes to life in us through the Holy Spirit. And just as Jesus is literally God's word made flesh, so Jesus is God's prayer for humanity. And when we pray, we are simply embodying again an active word inside of us.

Now there are those Christians who will tell you that the trick is to pray in Jesus' name, and that can seem like an imprimatur [inaudible 17:46] on a piece of paper that will get you admission; your ticket to Heaven. But in fact, for a moment, what does it mean to have a name? When Israel is named by God as the one who struggles with God, that name is not simply a convenience or a hope, it reflects an essence of someone.

So to pray "in Jesus' name," is to accept and step into the essence of who Jesus is. It's to understand the totality of Jesus' life and it's to see in the midst of Jesus' own suffering, our suffering. Because the prayers of Jesus did not enable Jesus to prosper or to be successful. But they enabled Jesus to be who God created Him to be. And when we pray to God and ask God for help, we are engaging and asking God to help us be who God is calling us to be.

And there are those who will tell you that God does not hear the prayer of a non Christian. The God I worship has excellent hearing. I believe God hears every prayer and I believe that there are people who pray in ways that are incredibly powerful that God hears. Because I believe in a God who would redeem all things through a Christ who has come into our midst and allowed His face to be spit at, and nails driven through His hands and feet for you and me.

Finally, prayer is our refuge. Years ago, I met a bishop who had landed with the Marines at Iwo Jima and he was trying to be brave and he had taken cover beside a rock. There was gunfire around him, and he closed his eyes and he imagined across, and he imagined his arms over the cross, such that his feet were dangling. And in that prayer, he stayed until the firefight ended.

So often, when we experience disappointment in prayer, we are tempted to cut off that part of ourselves that had been involved in the hope and fear, and the pleading out of fear that somehow we had been inappropriate. But I believe God wants the whole relationship that we bring into our prayers.

The great preacher, George Whitefield, had a son named John. And he felt called by God to name him John because he believed that God had called this child to be a great prophet. And when that child died, Whitefield feel resolved to never trust his instincts again. Now Whitefield is a great preacher. He was ironically a preacher of the heart who would ask that God would take the heart of stone inside of us and put in a heart of flesh.

I believe that the pain of losing that child and the prayers that he spoke, even when he thought that child was going to grow up and be great, God heard all of those prayers and

God was with him. So prayer does not ask us to cut off any part of ourselves. And any prayer that would deny a part of our existence as a human being is not part of what it means to be transformed by grace. This is what it means to see prayer as a refuge.

What is prayer for you? What is your prayer today? All of us pray by instinct. Sociologists and anthropologists, and comparative religion experts have noticed that every culture, every religion prays. What is your prayer today? What is the instinct that is drawing you to pray? Today's gospel would want us to know that prayers of intercession, prayers of supplication, these are the prayers that come to us as a gift and make us who we are. They enable us to experience the presence of God in our lives.

I want to finish with a couple of poems that I found over the past week. Two of them go with the grain of our reading from Genesis, and from the gospel of Mark, and they're done by artist I met last week named Hannah Burr. And Hannah, I've met her at a Detroit art fair, and she's written this incredible book, the incredible book said – it's called *Contemporary Prayers to Whatever Works*. And this was her way of recognizing a moment in which God came into her life and changed it in an instant. She had been at the end of her rope with a relationship and she went into the medication center in Boston that she went to. And she was praying to God and asking God to intercede in some way. And then suddenly, she heard, "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

But through we're off a little bit is the sound of God's voice was not unlike Steve Buscemi. But she leaned into it. And then she began to say a beautiful ornate prayer that she had memorized. And God said to her, "No, no, no. Just pray to me." And so she began to draw with a brush and some ink, some designs for God as she understood God as her higher power. And then she began to write some prayers and then she began to bring them together.

The first one that I want to read to you goes with the grain of our reading from Genesis, which is a prayer given to someone who is going to try to be reconciled. "God, please show me where I may be at fault in this situation. Indicate if action is needed on my part. If so, come with me, okay? Better yet go before me so that you're already there when I get there. Thank you." The God who hears her, the God who is present with her, the God who goes before her. This is not unlike someone who has wrestled with God and making his way across the river and hoping that God will be in the heart of the person he is going to meet.

The second is, "God help me to trust and know that I am welcome on this planet, scales and all, and squarely on my path even now." In our reading from Mark, Jesus gives this instruction on prayer to His disciples as they follow Him to His death. This is an instruction to pray and to hope that you are on the right path, that God has a place for you.

And finally, I want to close with a prayer that I wrote as a poem over the summer, which is a prayer that looks for God everywhere until finally realizing that it's God who has been looking for me.

All I want, Lord, is a slice of eternity Is
that too much to ask?
I looked for you in the sun's dazzling brightness
But Your light beat me back
I listened for you and the sound of many voices
But no music played, just noise
I searched in vain for reflections of Your face
But no one showed me Your smile
I let my fingers touch the broken skin of this world
But the wounds went unhealed
Crossing my legs I looked for you within myself
But only felt my pulse
It is only when I let go of trying to see You
You graciously see me
Your merciful gaze sees past the shape of my longing
Keep me in Your mind's eye
Your loving kindness surrounds me with delights
Too rich for mere mortals to taste

If you are an artist, what design would you draw as your prayer? If you were a poet, what words would you write as your prayer. What prayer is God giving you to pray? What voice is God speaking to you with? In what way can you return to the god who loves you and offer God your whole heart? Its burdens, its joys, its fears, its longings, and even yourself.

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