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AMDG

Proper 24C, Pentecost 29 - October 20, 2019

“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” This is the question Jesus leaves his disciples with, and it's the question he wants us to always be asking ourselves. Where is our faith? How is it expressed, and how is it grown in our lives?

Today's Gospel passage shows us that faith requires continuous interaction of prayer and action. One might even call it a dance. It is the essence of what the prophet Micah proclaimed, "...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God - a Divine Dance of Action and Prayer. One informing the other. Prayer guiding action, action requiring prayer.

In the parable Jesus showed us a woman so grounded in faith, so connected with God in prayer, that she could advocate rightly for herself. The parable doesn't explicitly say the woman prayed. But, Luke says at the beginning of our passage that Jesus was teaching the disciples about "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." So, prayer had to be such a deep part of the woman's walk of faith, that she could be steadfast in confronting the unjust judge.

Prayer is absolutely necessary to doing justice because it connects us with God's will. True prayer helps us walk humbly with our God. It strips away our ego and connects us with our true selves, the part of us that is connected with God. When we are engaged in true prayer we tend to seek God's will, and not our own; we tend to look at things less fearfully, approaching life's challenges more hopefully. These mindsets allow the Spirit to guide us and embolden us to act justly. When we are engaged in true prayer the natural outcome is right action - action that is focused on God's justice and mercy, action that is persistent, action that is confident, action that is humble. And as we engage in right action, we are naturally drawn to more prayer, partly because it is necessary to keep us grounded, but also because the grace of God we experience in right action calls us to more prayer. And, while individual prayer builds our

humility and allows God to hone us to do God's will, communal prayer is necessary as well. Praying always without losing heart is very difficult, and nearly impossible alone, and we gather in community to "encourage one another and build each other up."

When we try to act without prayer, we act without God. While we might believe we are focused on right action - loving kindness and doing justice - our work quickly becomes about our own selfish sense of what justice and mercy should be, the world's justice, rather than God's justice - quid pro quo; punishments and rewards. When we engage in action without prayer our work gets tripped up by personality; it becomes about me and what I want, it becomes driven by fear rather than Christian hope. This should be our signal that we need to pray more and to pray especially for God's will to be done. I once heard a very succinct description of right action that has become a sort of barometer for me, "If it's important to me personally, if the outcome is very important to me, then I'm not serving God, I'm serving my ego. If it's about righting a wrong and extending lovingkindness, and I'm happy to leave the outcome to God, then it's about doing God's will." The last one is so hard isn't it? I know it is for me. Doing what one can and leaving the outcome to God. It is the true test of faith, to move steadfastly forward, knowing you're doing God's will, not seeing the results you wanted, but trusting that it's all in God's hands. Holding on to our Christian hope that everything is being brought to perfection in God's time. Prayer is essential to keeping us grounded in hope.

But, does that mean that we never get to see positive outcomes of True Prayer and Right Action? Absolutely not. Jesus promised in this parable that God is so much greater than the unjust judge - "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them." There are always positive outcomes to living a life of faith, of True Prayer and Right Action. These outcomes are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they always come to those who pray always and do not lose heart - sometimes those outcomes are exactly what we had prayed and worked for...and more often they are even greater outcomes - wisdom, love, patience, forgiveness, freedom, healing, wonder, awe. And, when we look at those who we know live in faith, don't we see those gifts manifest in them? Don't we experience

them as wise, loving, patient, forgiving, full of wonder and awe? This isn't because they are different than us. They were made in the same image and likeness of God as everyone. They are able to manifest God's grace in their lives, regardless of circumstances, because they diligently practice prayer and right action.

Conversely, we have too many examples of those who say they are doing God's work, but are very obviously not engaged in True Prayer and Right Action. Even if they say they're doing good, what is apparent to everyone is the work of their own egos- fear, ignorance, hate, blame, impatience, judgmentalism, self-centeredness, bitterness, and resentment. Many times we try to do good works, with the best of intentions, but get so overwhelmed and dejected that we become embittered and cynical. This has happened to me many times and it's the signal that I need to reconsider my motives for my actions, and redouble my prayer life.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, God has plenty of work for us to do. Feeding the poor, protecting the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, forgiving our enemies. If we are to do this work in God's name then we must pray always and not lose heart. And, as we do, God's grace will always be with us. As Richard Rohr has said, "As long as you show up, the Spirit will keep working."

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament

Jeremiah 31:27-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say:

"The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children's teeth are set on edge."

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The Response

Psalm 119:97-104

Quomodo dilexi!

97 Oh, how I love your law! \*  
all the day long it is in my mind.

98 Your commandment has made me wiser than my enemies, \*  
and it is always with me.

99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, \*  
for your decrees are my study.

100 I am wiser than the elders, \*  
because I observe your commandments.

101 I restrain my feet from every evil way, \*

that I may keep your word.

102 I do not shrink from your judgments, \*  
because you yourself have taught me.

103 How sweet are your words to my taste! \*  
they are sweeter than honey to my mouth.

104 Through your commandments I gain understanding; \*  
therefore I hate every lying way.

The Epistle

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The Gospel

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"