

Pastor Roy's Sermon from October 20, 2013

The Church has a rich heritage. The source of her wisdom is the prayer of those who have patiently sought the face of God—since the time we began thinking about the mystery beyond us. Think of the prayers which have arisen from this place and our other churches since their beginning. Think of the lives of prayer which have found hope here gathered with God's people amidst the uncertainties and disappointments, as well as the joy and courage of faithful living.

We are reminded of them all as we gather today to commemorate their lives and their struggles and their joys and the peace into which they have invited us. Thanks be to God for their example and their faithful prayer.

What is prayer? I have some thoughts about prayer which flow from the example of our spiritual ancestors, especially Jacob and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer makes time for the Spirit. True Prayer--not words which seek to get our own way. But an attitude of listening. Our actions tend to be spastic, unfocused, apart from prayer. Prayer teaches us to question our assumptions. Assumptions about God, ourselves, and our neighbor. The Bible is a Judaeo-Christian study of prayer.

In Genesis, one of Israel's patriarchs, Jacob, spends his whole life wrestling with God and everyone around him. Is his life all that different from each of ours? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Does life feel like a wrestling match at times? Conflict. Assumptions. Struggle. Misunderstanding. Sometimes we are on the winning side, sometimes, the losing side, and sometimes, like Jacob it is a draw to the end.

Jacob prevails only because he does not give up. After a long night of wrestling with the angel of the Lord, he refuses to give up even when he cannot win. This night of wrestling is a metaphor for his life of wrestling which will not end any time soon. But persistence leads beyond victory to blessing and a rich peace. For Jacob, it is not a peace without struggle, but a peace in struggle. He is learning to let go of his stubbornness—of insisting that his way is the only way, and learning to accept and work with the details of his life and family and discover blessing in the midst of it. The one who at one time, used deceit and trickery to manipulate a blessing, has learned to accept the blessing that is his already. After learning this lesson and being blessed by God, he will shortly lose his beloved wife, his children will mistrust each other, and betray one another in their slow learning curve toward wisdom. Through it all, Jacob will overcome, albeit with a limp and a crushed spirit.

Jesus, with his story of a persistent widow and a dishonest judge, calls us to never give up praying, asking, pleading. Is God at all like a dishonest judge? I should think not. Is prayer about persistence? I should think so. About refusing to give in to despair? About learning to accept the way things are without giving up the struggle to make it all better? About increasing justice and peace without resorting to violence?

Like Jacob, persistence cannot mean insisting that we get our way, our answers, in our own time. That is non-prayer—yelling with our hands held over our ears. Insisting that our thoughts are God's thoughts. Instead, prayer is learning to listen with patience.

Our prayers change with time and experience. We can't keep praying the same thing, the same way, time after time after time. We follow the leading of the Spirit, rethinking our requests—waiting for

wisdom, we go deeper. We often realize that God has already answered our prayer. Or redirected us into wisdom. Jesus and Jacob tell us to keep wrestling, keep insisting, and trusting that God is at work.

What if we stop praying, what if we give up? If we surrender to the darkness, if we reckon that forces are lined up against us and against that which we seek—beauty, love, mercy, peace, wellness, life which never ends,—if we come to believe that these have been denied us and our neighbor, then we live in a very dark place. A place without prayer. A place without hope.

There are aspects of prayer. Many ways to pray. Many seasons of life which invite us to pray differently. We cannot pray according to “shoulds” and “oughts,” we can only pray according to our own deepest longings. Longings that point us to the true self into which God is making us.

Listen and the Spirit guides. When we still ourselves, and set aside our own creations long enough to hear the eternal voice of the Spirit calling to us—within us. Here is prayer.

According to the example of Jacob and the invitation of Jesus, don't stop praying. Yes, be honest in your praying. Yes, find new ways to pray. But don't stop hoping, trusting, waiting. Cry out for justice for yourself, your family, and all those whom justice seems to have left behind.

...And expect God to act. Call for God to act. We cannot demand that God act on our behalf, but we can insist that God defend the poor, the refugee, the stranger even in the midst of our own lost attempts to help.

Trust that it matters whether or not you ask. Keep seeking justice. . .regardless. Perhaps we will find answers in our prayer as we work for justice and kindness—as we live out our gifting.

The world has plenty of people who have given up on justice and compassion and God. Jesus and Jacob tell us to struggle on. To never let go. To resist the urge to give up. Prayer is active engagement with God and the forces at work in our world today. Let us pray...

Amen.