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Propers 24 (Pentecost 22) Series C 2016

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Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – October 16

In 2008 I was privileged to be a presenter for the Pastors of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC).

On the last day of my presentations, when my mind was on heading home to my family, when I was tired of all things India and simply wanted a decent shower, a good bed, and to be someplace without hordes of people and excessive heat, I took this picture. I had arrived early at the church at which I was presenting. I really wanted to go home. As I was waiting for my host to arrive and the rest of the Pastors, I sat in the courtyard of the beautiful church with my diminutive Hindu driver. This woman walked up to the front doors, took off her sandals, and knelt on the concrete of the entryway and began to pray. She did not go in. The dullness of her sari, the tattered fringe, and deep lines etched into her face told me of a life lived in poverty and difficulty.



She prayed. She prayed with what can only be described as a fervor and determination which is lacking in my own prayer life. I did not take a picture of her praying. It seemed like that would be to profane a holy thing, a sort of religious tourism which completely misses the point. After what must have been close to half an hour of kneeling on the brutally hard concrete of the stoop of the church she never entered, she stood, bowed, inserted her feet into her sandals and walked erectly and purposefully out into a life I can hardly imagine. I snapped this shot of her leaving to remind me of that moment, when all my self-centered concerns were revealed to be shallow and trivial.

I realized in that moment that God had given me a gift, and I also realized that he had heard her prayers. One of the things about traveling as a presenter among the Christians in India is the fact that we have often made our daughter churches incredibly dependent upon us. I cannot tell you how often I was “hit up” for funds for some worthy project. I still feel that if God gave me a spare \$5,000 I would like to fix the roof of that school for women and girls in Nagercoil. But this poor woman was totally in God’s hands that day. I could do very little for her but mutter the prayer I said as I watched her leave.

She had laid her burdens, her sorrows, her joys, I don’t know what, at the feet of her Savior. He had heard her. And she left that place, her church, or perhaps not her church, at peace. The fact she did not go in might mean she was a Hindu, many of whom choose to pray at Christian churches because they believe them to be places where prayers are heard. What was not in doubt was the fact that she believed God heard her prayer.

Collect of the Day

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.

The preacher may want to make sure he has considered carefully Luther's meaning to the second commandment. We should use God's name by calling on it in the day of trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. This sermon could be simply understood as an encouragement to keep the second commandment.

There is an old catch-22 of obeying a command to love God. If you obey the command because it is a command, then you are breaking it. God does not want the obedience which comes from the fear of the law, but he wants the obedience that comes from the joyful love of a heart that he has won. This is what the law cannot really demand and Satan cannot truly understand. The world has a pretty hard time with it too. This whole Christian religion is not about the rules and keeping the rules, and yet it is. God wants our hearts, not our obedience, but when he has our hearts, they obey joyfully and willingly and God loves that. So he commands the obedience, with the same word that created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. He commands, because his word creates the thing which he commands.

So, he commands us to pray, not because he needs to hear our prayers, but because he wants to hear them. He loves it when his children call. He has even gone so far as to absorb all the long distance charges himself. He has taken up residence inside all of his children just so he can have a great connection and hear us perfectly, before a word is even on our lips.

So, in this prayer, we ask that God mercifully preserves us steadfast in that good faith which joyfully, eagerly, willingly calls upon Him. We also want to remain in the good confession of that name of Jesus. We are given to use the name of God to pray, praise and give thanks says Dr. Luther. We were baptized into that name and we properly use it in prayer. We pray in Jesus name. That is a good thing.

The prayer describes an ideal world, doesn't it? It prays for something that we know sometimes only because it is the opposite of the way we are. We recognize not the substance of what the prayer talks about but rather we recognize it because it perfectly matches the hole which we see in our life. This whole Pentecost season has largely been about this joyful, thankful, responsive life which God calls forth from us in the Gospel. We started with prayer, and as we come to the close of the season, we remember that most faithful of all acts, prayer.

Have you ever thought of prayer as an act of sheer faith? The world doesn't think there is anyone listening. Having heard a few preachers pray at the altar, I wonder if they do. The best pray-er that I ever heard was a simple man who had never graduated from high school. You knew as soon as he bowed his head and opened his mouth that he was sure there was someone

listening. It was beautiful and taught me much. I really consider him one of my best “seminary” profs. He taught me more about prayer than anyone with a doctorate ever did. That is not to say that I don’t still have much to learn in this regard. I am still astounded at Luther who said he had to pray for two hours every morning if he wanted to get anything done. He also said he wished he could pray with the intensity which his dog watched him eat sausage.

Prayer is to faith much the same as breathing is to life. Breathing is not exactly life, prayer is not exactly faith, but a life which does not breathe/respire won’t last long and faith which does not pray has some serious questions to ask of itself. I don’t want to say that prayer is what it is not, but it seems that prayer is in fact the act of faith. Faith simply does pray. Are we simply back to James? Show me faith without works and I will show you my faith with my works. One can take this too far and turn prayer into the measuring stick of faith. We don’t want to do that, but faith is trusting God and that trust finds some sort of expression.

This ultimately hangs on trust. We have to trust that God is listening; he wants to hear from us, he loves us and wants to be part of our lives. That doesn’t mean he will just do what we want, we must trust.

The readings today will speak of those essential faith elements. Prayer is only one way that faith acts, but it will be the way around which this Sunday revolves.

Readings

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.” ³¹ *The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.*

There is a simple truth which we might miss in this text. In order to wrestle with someone, you have to be close and they have to be close to you. You cannot wrestle from afar or at a distance. At the end of this passage, when Jacob said that he had seen God face to face, that would not be an exaggeration for a wrestler.

This is one of the great stories and pivot points of the whole book of Genesis. From the beginning of the narrative section of this book, after the introduction of creation and fall, there has been this great sin hanging over the whole book. Cain's brutal murder of Abel has never really been resolved. In the story of Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, this brother on brother behavior returns. We simply have different ideas about family than the ancient, more tribal world thought about brothers. Your brother is the closest member of your tribe. It is perfectly acceptable to cheat and lie and steal from those outside the tribe. It might even be considered virtuous in many tribal communities. This has always frustrated westerners who come to tribal communities. But if tribalists will cheat the outsider they have intense loyalty to their fellow tribesman, especially their own brother. What Jacob has done to Esau in cheating him and that Esau has threatened to kill Jacob strikes at the very heart of their community.

Esau has threatened to repeat Cain's crime against his thieving and lying twin, Jacob. He would kill him. In the scene which follows this strange event in chapter 32, Esau and Jacob will be reconciled and Jacob will say "To see your face now that you have received me is like seeing the face of God." That is significant, because according to our text here, he knows what God looks like. And it is true. To look into the face of a human being who is forgiving you is looking into the face of God.

Genesis is like that, a masterful text. Jacob, who stole his brother's identity, is now given a new name. The same Jacob, whose strength single handedly moved the great stone from the well when he met Rachel, was bested in a wrestling match by a mysterious stranger. God who revealed himself to Jacob in visions at night and through angels as he journeys now reveals his face to Jacob in a fight, an "angel" who disappears at dawn.

But this text is important for a number of reasons. In chapter 28 of Genesis Jacob had made a deal with God. If God would care for him, take care of his life, feed him, clothe him, bring him safely back to his father's land, then God would have the privilege of being Jacob's God. This sounds too much like me!

As chapter 32 of Genesis opens, God has kept his end of the bargain. When Jacob crosses back over the river Jabbok here he will re-enter the promised land of his father. The final element of the deal that Jacob made is now complete, God has returned him to the land of his father, the land promised to Abraham. Obviously, having fulfilled his end of the bargain, God has arrived to collect. The wrestling match will end with God re-naming Jacob – Israel. One names people over whom you have some claim of ownership, usually a child. God is literally claiming what Jacob had pledged at Bethel – Jacob himself.

There is yet more in this text. Notice the method of God. He does not win the wrestling match! Jacob has him pinned and thinks that he is extracting a concession when he gets the new name. He has wrestled with God and with men and has prevailed. His new name tells the story. He has bested God. There is some rich incarnational stuff in this. God losing the battle here sounds much like Christ losing the battle on the cross only to have the ultimate victory. So too here, God wins by losing. A careful reading of the Jacob story reveals that prior to this, Jacob does not

refer to God ever as “My God,” but only through the carefully worded “The God of my father...” or “The Lord, your God.” He meticulously avoids ever calling God, “My God.” After this event, he consistently refers to God as “my God.” This wrestling match is Jacob’s conversion event. He gets a new name, just like we are given one in baptism. Christ has come and lost the battle that we might be winners of far more than we ever imagined, heaven itself.

What is perhaps not so obvious from this text is that Jacob has come to this event in terror. In the preceding verses he divided his family in half lest Esau, who was coming with 400 men, fall on them all and slay them. His hope was that half his children might survive. That is pretty desperate. Yet, this mysterious God who shows up in strange wrestling matches, shows up again a few verses after this event, when Esau takes him in his strong embrace and forgives him. Jacob says that too is seeing the face of God, the same God who wrestled and lost and claimed him just a few hours before.

Then there is the name which God bestows on Jacob: Israel. Consider Paul’s words in Galatians in which he declares that we are all Children of Abraham. He does not call us the “Abrahamites” but he calls us the Israel of faith. Israel got his name in this scene. He became Israel when he came to faith. The inclusion in the children of Israel is not a bloodline but a faithline distinction. That is not new with Paul or Jesus for that matter. It was written into the very Torah. This is why Paul in Galatians will assert that his proclamation is in fact the authentic Jewish faith. Christianity and its adherents in their earliest struggle with Judaism appeared to be contending that they were the more accurate readers of the Torah than the Pharisees and the Rabbis who followed them. Jesus is the authentic son of Israel and we are as well because we share the faith of Abraham and the faith of Jesus.

Psalm 121

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.

This is one of the traditional funeral psalms. It will have a real resonance for some members and has several beautiful settings which a choir or a good hymn might help you with.

You may also want to play with the security piece here. God's watching is a very good thing, according to the psalmist, but is that the way most of us think of this. God watching me sounds like big brother is watching. Recent disclosures about the NSA particularly make us aware of this. What about my privacy? Christians admit they have none, at least none from God. That is a nicely counter-cultural message, especially when you say that Christians are not only OK with this snooping God, they positively delight in it. Yes that means he knows everything about me, even my sins and problems, but it also means that his declaration of love for me is not made in ignorance or misconception. He knows all about me, perhaps better than even I do. Yet, He still loves me.

II Timothy 3:14-4:5

¹⁰ You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. ¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 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.

⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

I have included the verses prior and one after so you can have some sense of the context of these important words of Paul to Timothy.

This is a great text, and worthy of preaching. It really helps us see the centrality of the Word in the first century vision of worship by the Apostle and the communities of Christians that he gathered.

But notice also the basis for the whole exhortation. Paul encourages Timothy to continue in what he has learned and has firmly believed. There is that faith thing again. Here it is the good work of being a preacher, an overseer, a bishop in that place. It takes faith to read that text and listen to it and put it into practice in life. If it will reprove, correct and train me, I must hear it, believe it, and trust it. It must be God's Word to me, the precious communication from God which refreshes my very being.

It takes that old and sturdy faith to preach. You cannot think your way into being a preacher nor can you imagine that the simple power of your own word can really make a difference. You preach because God is at work here. You know that you have much greater enemies than those who oppose you at a voters meeting. Your enemy is ancient and prowls like a roaring lion. My weapons and yours are insufficient for that fight, but God's Word, for all its weakness and seeming impotence before the strong arm of the Jacobs in the world, that Word is the only victory we will know. That word has conquered death itself.

So, be sober minded, endure your suffering and do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. Faith acts in those things. This is why being a preacher is the best job of all. You get to do what your heart desires, please its God.

What do our ears itch to hear today? Too often we have turned the Bible into a strong thing which reflects a strong God. I am not saying God is not strong but this seems to be to be just much a pandering to itching ears as anything the success gospel guy who fills a stadium says or the liberal church down the road does by painting a rainbow on the sign. Everyone panders in sense. We preach against homosexuality and decry the success gospel types, and our people nod their heads and are glad that we are not like other sinners.

But we forget that the Scriptures are given to us to make us wise for salvation. God comes to Jacob and wrestles, but God loses! This is not going to make us comfortable. Efforts to make the word of God "strong" may be in fact misguided when the Word who came and dwelt among us saved us by submitting to the cruel treatment of the men who drove him up a hill to a grisly death on a cross. He could have called down twelve legions of angels, but he did not. Our preaching of the word cannot lose sight of that Word made bruised, bleeding, and crucified flesh.

Luke 18:1-8

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?”

What will we do with this parable? Too often we jump to the requirement to pray in this. But when we preach that as such from the pulpit, all our folks hear is a brutal message of law. They are not praying properly, they are not praying enough, they are prayer failures.

But think of the relationships in which we repeat our statements over and over and over, and we are never done saying those things. This needs to be the model for prayer and needs to be the narrative in which our discussion of prayer is embedded. Are we not talking about our closest relationships? When am I done saying “I love you” to my wife? I can never check that box off. I am never done expressing that love her and, on her part, she is never really done saying that me. We never get weary of hearing those words. Prayer, and any discussion of “asking God for something” needs to be contextualized in that relationship. We are talking to the lover of our souls. We are asking the one who has given everything, even his own life, to us.

At the same time this text raises some difficult questions for us. In the past we have noted that folks, especially folks in tough situations, all over the world, are crying out day and night. Yet their prayers, at least on our time scale, often seem to be unanswered. How do we preach these words to them?

And what about the countless groans and prayers offered by the majority of suffering humanity who are outside the apparent bounds of faith? Over half the world’s population are not Christians. We also wondered about the prayers which were offered outside of the Christian community. Are they heard too?

These sorts of questions demand faithful trust from the reader. There are times when we walk out the door of Church only to find that we are not feeling the promised presence of Christ. He seems that he is not there to tell me, “I love you” in that instant. The fact that I hear no word does not mean I have no love. One of the things I love about being with the people I love the most is that we don’t need to fill every moment with chatter. We can simply be in their presence. Thus, love and faith go hand in hand. The relationship and the expression of the relationship are not a static. I don’t need God’s voice projected into the background of my life like the piped in music which afflicts the modern shopping experience. The person who has faith, also has a love of God, even when it seems that the other has gone silent. But that does not mean we go silent. That person will not grow weary of speaking to him, just as a loving spouse will find new ways to say that and continue to say that for the rest of his/her life.

Jesus also speaks of perseverance here. Some folks will imagine that they have prayed a formula 100 times and have prayed with perseverance, but there is potentially no heart in this. Armenio, in a Roman Catholic context, sees an issue with meaningless prayers spoken out of rote and commandment. This is mechanical sense of prayer. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:5-7) talks about the repetition of prayer. But interestingly, when he gets around to telling us how to pray, he gives us a prayer to repeat – the Lord’s Prayer.

Here the Lord’s exhortation to perseverance in prayer is not met in the simple repetition of prayer, but in the relationship which seeks and yearns to pray. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of this parable to think that if we just bother God enough he will give us justice. Jesus’ words in this text point to the fact that God does not respond to prayer this way. He does care about people, unlike the judge. We are called upon to pray in this parable because we are praying to a judge who loves us, not this miserable judge of the parable. The preacher needs to contrast God with this judge, not compare.

Now, as God’s beloved, as the one who has heard from him over and over that he loves us, does this not prompt frequent communication from us? We don’t chase after him as some child simply repeating “Dad, dad, dad....” But we are the friend you love to talk to. The preacher will want to couch this relationally. Is it ever a burden to talk to your friend? Do you need to “come up with something” to say?

As I think about this, it seems that we can get really hung up on the comparison with the selfish judge that Jesus makes here. God is not like this, I think that is the point. Jesus is trying to say that prayer even works when the one who listens is a total jerk, but God is not a total jerk. This is a negative comparison. Jesus uses this sort of technique elsewhere. We thought perhaps the parable of the dishonest manager might have been one of those, or not. You see this in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus notes that even a bad father gives his child something good to eat when asked, won’t God do more than that? So too here, if even this guy will give her justice, won’t God do more? Won’t God act speedily instead of tardily? And yet, Luke tells us this is an exhortation to ceaseless prayer, that we do not lose heart. Why be persistent? Do we have to be persistent? The argument here seems to break down a little bit. How is telling us that God is better than this guy encouragement to be persistent?

Yet all of us have prayed and we know the value of persistence in prayer. It is childish to think that we will get what we want from God immediately. Our schedules are obviously not God’s schedule. So just what is the point here?

I think the preacher wants to remember that the best impetus to prayer is the sure and certain faith that we are heard, that God is eager to listen to us. This is an exhortation to ceaseless and hearty prayer. God is better than this judge. He does not delay because he does not care, is tired, or he has other, more important things to do. He is infinite. He really can give us undivided attention. When we pray, he listens intently to us. What is more, the Genesis text tells us that God is not distant. He is not far away but near to us. He lives among us. Jacob can see his face in the hairy mug of his brother Esau. You and I hear the answers that God has given to us in the

loving words spoken by preachers and parishioners, by parents and children who act as his agents on his behalf. He is not distant but makes his presence known through us and to us in the people he has placed in our lives.

I think we do well not to make this more complicated than it is. Luke tell us what this is about. But I sometimes wish he had left off that last line? What is that about? Will Jesus find faith in the earth when he comes? What does Jesus mean by that? Is he talking about the last coming? Or is he talking about his first arrival which many still thought was a future event when he spoke these words. Is he talking about this day when he comes to me in Word and Sacrament? Does he find faith here? If he questions the faith of the first century folk who seemed to religiously charged, what about us? What does this say to us? What is he looking for when he wonders if there will be faith? I think it is the very thing I said in the prior paragraph. It is easy to look at the Church for all its warts, the preacher for all his failings, the congregation with all its weakness and dithering, and to think that this is just some human institution, poorly run by bureaucrats in St. Louis, or Chicago, or Rome, or anywhere else you can find such bureaucrats. That would be missing a critical point of faith. Christ is near. He dwells within the assembled people of God. Wherever two or three gather in his name, he is there. Do we pray and act as though he is there? Do we long for the presence of other Christians because that presence bears with it the very presence of God? Or do we utter our prayers without heart, infrequently and without fervor because we are not sure that someone is hanging on the very words that we say, someone who delights to hear from us? Do we roll our eyes at Christian fellowship because we long for something more “spiritual” or more “real?”

This is picking up on a theme which we have used more than once before. How will we develop it? It would seem that the courage of the Psalmist who finds God’s protective presence to be a great assurance is a good place to start. Another would be the words of the Epistle lesson which speak of God’s active role through His Word in our life.

Remember that God is better than this judge. He is not begrudgingly hearing us. He delights in our prayers.

I encourage anyone to read C. S. Lewis “Screwtape Letters.” There he speaks of how the devil has filled the world with noise so that we do not have a silent moment to think, reflect, or pray. Have cell phones compounded that? Do we have time to pray? Do we still have the capacity to slow down and just think for a minute? Or is it a question of the will?

Law

1. The world distracts us from hearty faith. It has other solutions to our problems. They may be gifts from God too; indeed the answer to prayers I have spoken, but it is so easy to see them as the answers in and of themselves, losing sight of the fact that they are gifts from God.

2. Too often I live my life as though God were far away and I was just a distant relative. He says he loves me, but so do lots of distant cousins whom I see once in a blue moon. I don't shape my life around them or expect them to listen to my gripes and joys, my complaints and triumphs. And so I don't tell these things to God. When the big thing like a death in the family happens, I send the note or email to those cousins. God gets my Christmas letter and an occasional card on special occasions, but does he live in my house? Or perhaps better said, do I acknowledge his presence?
3. God's slowness in response, slow to my perspective, sometimes serves to discourage my prayer. I forget that his blessings come in just the right time, the due season. I am like a child in this. I want now.
4. Our lives often turn into a wrestling match with God, when all he wants is to claim our hearts and lives so he may bless them. Just talking to him can be hard sometimes. Why is that? Are we just cell-phone toting misanthropes who use our technology to keep us apart from our fellow human beings, who are the agents of God's love? Do we need a couple of beers in us to really pour our heart out to God? Yet God invites us to dinner with Him in every Eucharist. Can we relax there? Food is supposed to do that for us. The people we eat with should be our closest friends. Does that include God?
5. With him out of the center of our life, all sorts of things get out of plumb. Our ministry is not faithful to Him, presenting the Word in season and out of season, but it wonders if we should preach this sermon. Will it offend the people? Will we drive someone away? They have itching ears, you know. It is true, the Methobapticoctal down the street will tell them what they want to hear. But whom am I preaching for? Is it not to honor God? Dare we please people at the risk of not pleasing him? This shows up in my prayers as well, or the lack of prayer. Is this ultimately a question of idolatry? I pray all the time, the question may be to whom are my prayers addressed? C. S. Lewis says that every part of my life, the things and moments will on the last day be claimed by one of two beings. I am not one of them.
6. My conception of prayer may in fact be very lawful. I have done my duty, I have prayed, why hasn't God delivered? I am praying, why am I not happy yet?

Gospel

1. Jesus does not wait for us to get our act together before he comes. He took up residence in each of us in baptism, often before we could even say a word. We don't have to go looking for God to pray to him. He has made himself incredibly available

- to us. We have a very private line to God, because he has taken up residence in our lives. He is not waiting for us to be pure or perfect, he is eager to listen to us now.
2. Jesus remains with each of us, bringing the whole presence of God with himself. The Spirit cajoles us; the Father showers us with love; the Son unites with us in his Incarnation. This is God's doing, not mine. It does not hang on how well I have done, but on what God has promised and how he has fulfilled those promises.
 3. God is willing to lose the wrestling matches we have with him, but he never gives up on our heart. God wins through losing. Jesus conquers death by dying. He loves that heart, he wants that heart, he has already laid claim to it and will not forfeit that claim to anyone except us if we would hold it from him. He values our freewill, our ability to say "No" to him, much more than we do. It is scary how much he thinks of it.
 4. God strengthens us to pray with perseverance. He has answered the biggest questions of all with his incarnation, death, and resurrection. The human race has been run perfectly in Christ. Death has been conquered. Sin has been vanquished and fights now a retreat into its hellish prison.
 5. And so, while our silence is not what he seeks, he remains faithful to his promise. Every day dawns and his hope is renewed. We cannot think that because we have failed to pray, that God will not hear our prayer. This is the day of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. Pray now. Every time we mouth the words of the table prayer, he likes that. When we go to Church and say, "Have mercy on us" after every petition in the prayer, he listens to that. He likes to have mercy.
 6. When we say that Lord's Prayer and ask for a kingdom to come and a will to be done, he hears that. Daily bread is given and we are delivered from the evil one. These are the prayers of his saints and they are precious in his sight.
 7. He would love to hear more. You have much to say to him, your little things and great things. Your burdens he would bear, your joys he would delight in, your fears he would calm and your pain he would share. It will not be what you might want all the time, it may even be a little frightening. God is not safe, but he is very, very good.

Sermon Ideas

There are so many ideas just waiting to be preached inside these texts. I have laid out several additional sermon titles and goals. If we want to develop any of those come to the Tuesday night session or send me an email.

1. Persistent In Prayer (Gospel: That the hearer would rejoice in the Gift that God has given to every baptized human being – a straight line to him in prayer. He mercifully, graciously, lovingly hears our prayers – so pray!)

This sermon is a sanctification sermon of sorts, but it only works if you preach the relationship which God has established. The prayer which is mechanically done is not keeping this command. Exhortation to prayer is senseless unless it is based on the loving ears of God who has come to us in Word and Sacrament, filled our hearts with love for him, and planted in us a faith which trusts the promises which he has made.

Why pray? Not because it “works” or because it is God’s command. Both are true, but that is not why we pray. We pray because our best friend wants to hear from us, because the one whom we love is right there would engage us in conversation, we speaking through prayer, he speaking through the Word and Sacrament and Community in which he makes himself known to us. Our prayers are never done. It is same way that we are never done telling our spouse “I love you.” You cannot simply say that once and imagine that you are done. Nor can you repeat the phrase five times and imagine that you are good for the week.

This sermon is an exhortation to prayer because the unrighteous judge is not like our God, because God does not have to be roused from his slumber and corruption to hear the prayers of a persistent widow. He listens to his children attentively, and catches every one of them in his sure hands when the enemies of this world, sin, death, and Devil have done their worst to them. God pays intense and close attention to his children.

One of the reasons perhaps we don’t pray, is that we are directing God in how to answer prayers, we are dictating to him what we want. He doesn’t respond to that in any way we like. That doesn’t work in personal relationships either. (How many of us get much in the way of results when we dictate terms to our spouse?) Is this sort of prayer really a prayer born of faith? The faithful pray-er will acknowledge the fact that God is God and I am not. I trust him, I lay my troubles, sorrows, and requests in his hands, but it is not my will which must be done, but it is his good and gracious will which we seek. That means in a sense prayer is also a form of submission to God.

We dare not be discouraged simply because in our short lives, things don’t go swimmingly all the time for us. There are many reasons that may explain that, but God’s inattention cannot be one of them. The biblical picture of God hearing his children’s prayers is just too firmly woven into this witness. The persistent picture of God as the beloved parent, God hearing the cries of the Israelites and sending Moses, the spouse of Hosea’s texts, the groom who weds his beloved, the vine to which we are connected as branches, this is all reinforcement of the connection which God has established with himself.

The preacher may want to list out some of the reasons that folks don’t pray as a way to “round up” the sinners in this. All of us are guilty of being too busy with other things and neglecting a relationship. All of us have applied some foolish economic model to this and wondered if the return on the investment is sufficient. All of us have chased after other

gods of acceptance and status and failed to bear witness to God as the one who answers prayers. All of us have acted faithlessly at times.

But still the Lord of heaven and earth has watched over our coming and goings, from this time forth and even for ever more. The promise made in our baptism is not dependent on our prayers, but God's faithfulness to himself. So pray! God really does want to hear from you. He has united himself with you in his Son, in this sacrament, in baptism, in this community which he has called his beloved bride. He wants to hear from you because he loves you.

Just as marriages often use patterns and regular times and places when we express our love, so too might prayer be understood. Some couples always kiss before he leaves in the morning, others embrace when he comes home. While rote and mechanics are not really the heart of prayer, pattern and regularity are also good. One wise man once told me that "unless you have regular times and places when you pray, chances are you don't pray."

Three years ago Armenio had everyone write their name on a sheet of paper, mix them up in a basket, and have the folks there that Sunday each reach in and take a name home with them and promise to pray for that person. A few structures like that for prayer can be really helpful for folks. Simply saying "pray" is often hard for someone, especially someone who is not used to praying.

Hymn Suggestion: Our God our Help in Ages Past

2. Persistent in Love (OT: That the hearer would believe that God has pursued them, far beyond simply establishing a claim upon us, he has pursued our hearts and minds and whole selves, so that he may hold us in His loving embrace, give us a new name, and make us his own.)

God exhorts us to persistent prayer, but perhaps we would be much more persistent in prayer if we realized the depth of his persistent love for us. Consider the story of Jacob whose narrative reaches an important climax in today's text. Jacob was the twin son of Isaac and thus dear Abraham's grandson. In the shadow of his elder brother Esau who was a great hunter and "manly" man, Jacob was raised by his mother in the tents.

He seemed to bear a significant chip on his shoulder. He deceived his foolish brother, essentially stole Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup, deceived his father and stole Esau's blessings. When things were so hot in his father's home that Esau was ready to kill him, he ran away to his uncle, and the whole pattern played out again. Within a couple of decades his cousins and uncle were so angry with him that he thought it best to leave.

On the outbound part of his flight from Esau to Laban, (Gen 28) he had a vision. And at Bethel he made a vow, a contract with God. It was manipulative Jacob at his best

(worst!). If God would take care of him, feed him, clothe him, and finally bring him safely to his home, then God would have the privilege of being Jacob's God. I think most of us, if we were God, would have counted that as a singularly worthless honor. But God is not like the wicked judge in the Gospel and he is not like us either. He loved the stinker Jacob despite his arrogance, deceitfulness, and blind stupidity.

In this reading we find the pursuing God, the one who has bound Jacob with a "deal" in which Jacob is supposed to win and God is the loser. That God has come to collect. All night Jacob tries to weasel out of God's grasp. All night they grapple and fight with one another. Of course God could smash Jacob like a bug. But then the heart and life he has always loved would be snuffed out. So God refuses to "win" and yet in losing the wrestling match gains what he has always wanted – Jacob himself. From this day forward he will always call God "my God."

God will reveal himself to Jacob immediately in the forgiveness of his brother.

This God is pursuing us as well, is he not? Has he not even listened to our foolish prayers, has he not lost the battle with death on a cross so that he may embrace us in his arms as well. Has he not given us the new name in our baptism and claimed us as his own. Even now, is he not pursuing us that we may be his own and live under him in his kingdom in everlasting innocence, righteousness and blessedness?

We wondered if fire and brimstone has its limitations here. Does the preaching of repentance really involve the invitation to return to the God who loves us and whom we know love us. Could this sermon really encourage the Christian in the life to which God has called them, one which frequently finds us oscillating as sinner/saint.

3. God's Useful Word (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would engage the hearer in a saving, loving, fruitful relationship which is centered on the Word of God.)

Paul speaks of God's word fulsomely within the verses of our Epistle lesson today. But I wonder if modern American Lutherans really hear what he is saying. We have turned our Bibles into moral guides. We imagine that being biblical means we are living the right sort of life and voting for the right sort of candidates. Please don't get me wrong. I am all for morality and the wise exercise of our duties as a citizen. I just don't think that is really what Paul has in mind here. I think we have wandered off into the sorts of myths and errors maze which Paul speaks of in the end of the text. Our ears have itched to hear God tell us that we are right and "they" are wrong, whoever the "they" might be today.

Holy Scripture is useful because it pushes Christ into our lives. This is the equipment which we need for every good work. Too often we have read the Bible as a manual of some sort which teaches us morality and gives us life lessons. But this is a foolish position to take. There are very few moral examples in the Bible we can follow. Abraham was willing to give Sarah away, not once but twice! Jacob was a stinker. David was an adulterer and murderer. Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines and they led him

astray. Paul had persecuted and murdered and it appears that Jesus hung around with some folks who were genuinely challenged when it came to their morality. One of his disciples was Simon the Zealot! Zealots were not nice people. Today we would call them terrorists!

The bible is not a terribly moral book, it encourages and speaks to morality, but as a moral book it is not particularly impressive. But morality is not the goal of the Bible. Hear what Paul says very carefully. The Scriptures can make us wise to salvation. God saves immoral people. Thank God! If he did not, heaven would be a vacant. The Word of God was given not that we get our lives straightened out, but that Christ come to us. The Word was made flesh and this book we read bears witness to Him.

So what of this teaching, rebuking, correcting, admonishing, and more that Paul speaks of here? Good, I say, but under the principle of what he has already said. It is making us wise to salvation and that wisdom is not found in right living, but in Christ, the One revealed in that scripture. This is nothing other than Law and Gospel. The whole point of the reproof, the teaching, the correction, etc., is not the amendment of a sinful life but the restoration of the sinner to the favor of God.

The usefulness of the Bible is perhaps not what we expect. It is useful, very useful, because it shows us what failures we are and what a gracious, loving, and forgiving God we have.

4. Winning by losing (OT – That God would open the eyes of the hearer to delight in the strange cruciform ways of God and be empowered by God at work in his/her life.)

This sermon wants to focus on the strange behavior of God in the OT. God essentially loses the wrestling match. It appears to be a draw, but God is in Jacob's grasp and asks to be released at the dawn. He loses that fight in a very real sense.

What is more, this is all about God getting the short end of the stick. In chapter 28 Jacob had made a strange bargain with God. If God would take care of Jacob, give him food to eat and clothes to wear and return him to his father's land, God would the privilege of being Jacob's God.

This all starts to sound rather familiar to us. Jesus looks like a loser too when he walks up that hill with a cross on his back, flayed by a whip, nailed to that cross, and left hanging there to die. He did not look much like a winner that day, but a loser, the worst sort of loser. When he prophesied this earlier in the Gospels, Peter pulled him aside and rebuked him. No self-respecting messiah behaves this way. But Jesus does.

This is a good thing. We see this again and again with God. There is something about losing which is important to the salvation plan of God. God does not save the world, either one man like Jacob or the whole world without taking to himself the nature of a loser. Yes, God chooses to be a loser, and we cannot, dare not, weasel out of fact that it is

a genuine losing. It doesn't feel right for us to say that God is a loser. It feels "wrong" to say that, but this is the temptation to glory of which Luther spoke already in 1518 at Heidelberg. The true theologian is a theologian of the cross, not a theologian of glory.

Do we really want to deal with God the winner, the success story? Really? Winners are not our people.

He has not stayed a loser, it is true. On the third day God made him a winner, elevated him to heaven's throne where, as Paul notices today, he is the judge of all. But even there, the Judge is reminded of his losing. He judges based on those holes in his hands and feet.

The hard part is that this "loser" name is not only God's, but it comes to us too. We bear his name. God has not sent us into the world as his agents, as his living invitations, to be attractive in our winning ways. It is in our brokenness and frailty, in our forgiven sinfulness that we become the manifestation of God's kingdom in this place. Often it is not when we look good or successful that Jesus shows up the most clearly. The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a sanctuary for holy people.

What makes this so strange is that God comes all the way to the bottom of this human pit to find us. He loses the wrestling match to Jacob, he loses his life on a cross, but in those lowest places he finds us, picks us up, and makes something of us. But praise God, this works! God's peculiar ways are not the way we would do it, but with humble fishermen and tax collectors he changed the Roman Empire of old. With the simple candle-lit prayers of folks gathered in Leipzig and pious dockworkers in Poland he threw down the Iron curtain. He works through our weakness, our "loser" nature to bring about his kingdom. Embrace it. Own your own brokenness and see it as the opportunity for God to do his great work through you! I cannot get there by myself – I must have God's help. But he was a loser once, he helps losers today.

5. Wrestling with God (OT – That the Holy Spirit would bring comfort to the struggling Christian.)

This sermon is designed for the struggling person/congregation. The wise preacher will remember that God's time table is often not our timetable. The Psalm is helpful here. God watches over us night and day. He is watching over comings and goings which far transcend what we can see.

The prayerful life to which Jesus exhorts is also important here. Jesus speaks words of comfort to us that we not lose heart. The one who listens to us is not like the unrighteous judge but a righteous One who hears us, who listens to us. Jesus is not wondering if we will be praying on that day of his return, but he wonders if anyone will believe that. This sermon exhorts us to that faith.

The OT lesson helps us see God as a wrestling partner. He has wrestled with Jacob a great deal. Jacob in his foolishness has struggled with God, and God has entered into that struggle with him, not because Jacob was wise and powerful, but because God loved Jacob and would not lose touch, even when that touch was a wrestler's grip.

The really good news for us and for all the wrestling Jacobs out there is that God did not wait for Jacob's faith to flourish and be confessed on his lips. God was grappling and struggling with Jacob and Jacob struggled with God, but it won't be until after this episode that Jacob finally confesses his faith with the words, "The Lord, my God."

The wrestling we feel, the struggle which probably makes us uncomfortable, is not the end of the world. It might be something really good, even divine. God wrestles with people. He has been doing this for a very long time. Jacob lived almost 4,000 years ago!

But any discussion of this wrestling needs to take into account the fact that God loses this match with Jacob. God does not come in his omnipotent power and majesty. Jacob would have surely been squashed like a bug. God comes in resistible and humble humanity. A man wrestled with Jacob. God comes in weakness, the weakness of a cradle, a cross, a tomb, a carpenter's hands, and a criminal death. He doesn't come to dominate, but to win us through the foolish, weak preaching of a cross.

For Jacob, winning that wrestling match was a pivotal event. We have learned earlier in the story that Jacob was noted for being a physically very strong person. Wrestling is his forte. But any human strength in the face of God is surely insignificant. But oddly not here. God lost the wrestling match but in another real sense won what he really came for. He got Jacob's heart and life. Jacob walked away with much more than a limp, he got a new name, and he walked away with a new realization of his place in God's world. The Lord was his God now and hereafter.

The preacher may want to look up Luther's words on *Anfechtung* or *Tentatio* as theological categories and necessary elements for anyone who would preach and interpret the word. Luther thought that such struggle was necessary.

Augustine also says interesting things about the Bible in this regard. He says that God puts difficult things in the text because we gain so much more when we learn something through struggling for it. (Look in *De doctrina Christiana* (book II?)). God uses difficulties.

6. Ready in season and out of season (Epistle - That the Holy Spirit would focus the hearer upon God who never changes and thereby equip the hearer to be a living witness no matter what is going on around him/her.)
7. Equipped for every good work (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would empower, direct, and encourage the hearer to a life of loving service to God and neighbor.)

8. Named (OT, Psalm, and Epistle – That the hearer would trust that God has laid his claim upon them in Baptism and made his/her whole life holy in that name.)
9. My Help Comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth (Psalm – that the hearer would in every distress lift up eyes to the hills and beseech God for help.)