

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our main text for tonight is the Gospel you just heard from Matthew, in which Jesus and his disciple go to Gethsemane, where he prays while they nap. But the other two texts are vital to understand too. In keeping with our overall Lenten theme of Returning to God, our theme for the evening is *prayer*—specifically, prayer as God’s invitation to call upon him, and God’s command for us to be constant in prayer.

I realize that *prayer* can be a touchy subject. Because it’s supposed to be such an intimate thing, such a personal thing, where we children call upon our heavenly Father daily, even hourly, with words of thanksgiving and with cries for help ... and yet, if we’re perfectly honest, few of us are very good at prayer. There is always a little twinge of conscience that comes with any discussion of how *often* or how *well* we pray. We have good intentions, usually, but a Scripture passage such as Paul’s encouragement to “rejoice in the Lord always” and to “pray without ceasing” can make us flinch. We tend to worry more than we rejoice, we sometimes tend to *forget* about praying, and we certainly struggle to pray “without ceasing.”

It is a good bet that your prayer life does not measure up to the ideal that God’s Word sets for us, and it probably falls short even of whatever standard you set *for yourself*. So if you’re a little uncomfortable with this topic, it’s understandable. But the point to take home with you tonight is that when God calls you to pray, he also provides *the means* for you to do so and even *fulfills* what you are unable to do. For in much the same way that Jesus is the primary actor in your salvation and justification, the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in your sanctification and your growth as a Christian. That means, among other things, he—*not you*—is the primary actor in your prayer life.

In the Old Testament reading, Jacob is returning home to the land of Canaan. He ran away from his twin brother Esau after tricking him out of his birthright, and then tricking him *again* out of their father’s blessing. Jacob himself had been tricked by his father-in-law, Laban, and ended up

with two wives. Now he is nervous about fleeing across the desert with all the people and livestock God has given him. Mostly, he's terrified of meeting Esau again because he assumes Esau still wants to take revenge and kill him. Jacob's world is kind of up in the air.

So he splits his whole traveling company into two camps in hopes that if Esau and his 400 men overtake one group, at least the other group will be spared. Jacob sends Leah and Rachel and his children ahead, and is left alone by himself for the night.

What happens next is astonishing. A man—or what seems to be a man—wrestles with Jacob all night long. Apparently it was quite a match because neither one comes out on top through the whole ordeal. As things unfold, we slowly begin to realize that this is no ordinary wrestling match. This isn't just some bandit or criminal who stumbled upon Jacob and tries to rob or harm him. Jacob is wrestling with God himself! Specifically, Jacob is wrestling with God the Son, before he becomes incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. Jacob is wrestling with Jesus.

This is no allegory, no parable, no dream. This actually happened. And one lesson we can learn from the wrestling match is that the trials and temptations God allows *us* to bear are ultimately intended *not* to destroy us, but to build us up and to bless us. One of the themes of the Bible is that God brings good out of evil. Just look at the Cross of Christ to see how suffering is turned into blessings for you.

Now, although the event was literal, you *can* use it as a sort of metaphor for your own prayer life. In a sense, you wrestle with God in your *prayers*. You ask for things that you believe you need, and you don't always get them. You struggle with prayers that seem to go unanswered or that are answered *differently* than you had hoped. You long for God's clear guidance and direction, and you groan under the weight of the trials you feel you must endure. But in the end, through your prayers and your wrestling, God is at work. He *changes* you. He *forms* you. He molds you into someone more like Jesus.

Selfishly (and sinfully), we may perceive that all we *ever* do in our prayers is wrestle with God. But what if it is actually a time when *God* is wrestling with *us*? What if it's a time when God is wrestling *for* us? A time that he uses to draw us closer to him, and to reorient our priorities, perspectives, and perceptions. That is why the primary actor in your prayer life is not *you*, but *God*. And this is why God changes Jacob's name. *Israel* means *both*, "strives with God" *and* "God strives for." Remember, you the Church are now the true Israel, because as *you* strive with him, *he* strives for you.

One of the things Jacob says to his opponent is "I will not let you go unless you bless me." This is terrific. Imagine saying that to God's face. In the context of our prayers, it would be something like, "I won't stop praying until you answer me." It calls to mind Jesus' story of the persistent widow—the one where the widow comes before the unrighteous judge, again and again, demanding justice until he finally gives in. Jesus' point, of course, is that you should expect much greater blessings from a God who actually cares about you and loves you.

Part of the problem is that most of us don't come to prayer prepared to go toe-to-toe with God all night long. We don't train to be prayer warriors. I know that's an evangelical-sounding phrase, but the truth is we're not equipped for that kind of battle because we don't even expect prayer to *be* a battle. In fact, not only do we generally do a pretty poor job of being constant in prayer, we often are not entirely sure *how* to pray in the first place.

We wonder... "What do I say? How can I come before God and speak with any kind of eloquence. Words fail me. My emotions overwhelm me. Distractions are everywhere I look—even my own *thoughts* distract me. If there's one thing I'm aware of in prayer it's my own shortcomings—it's the fact that I know I don't have the right to ask God of anything.

We're a lot more like Peter and James and John than we are like Jacob and Jesus. Falling asleep when we should be diligent. Dozing off when the Lord himself tells us to be alert. We don't know what to ask for, or how to ask. And so we *don't* ask. We *don't* pray. At least not nearly as often as we know we should.

Perhaps, like me, when you were younger and heard this Gospel reading, you wondered what in the world was wrong with the disciples. Why *couldn't* they stay awake one hour with Jesus on the night he gets arrested? *Now* perhaps you felt a little sheepish that you stumble in your own prayer life and even fall asleep during prayers sometimes. At least you don't have Jesus in your face calling you out for your failures. But if you took God's Word to heart, you may *have* felt like our Lord was chastising you.

But there is another Word from the Lord. An answer, a solution, that we sinners desperately need to hear. It comes from Paul, the Lord's apostle. He says, we don't really know how to do this prayer thing, but that's okay. "Because the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." And what the Holy Spirit does, you can be sure he does perfectly.

*Your* prayers may falter, but the Holy Spirit's prayers *do not*. You may offer up weak and imperfect prayers, but the Spirit makes up for it. What you cannot do, God does for you. What you are unable to do, God does with ease on your behalf. Where you fail, God is perfect. And *in him*, you and your prayers are reckoned as perfect too.

Really, prayer is a reflection of faith. And your faith is *also* imperfect and flawed. But again, what you could not do, Jesus stepped in and did for you. He fulfilled the call for Christians to rejoice in the Lord always and to pray without ceasing. That's what he did in his ministry, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and all throughout his passion. He wrestled with his Father and let his Father wrestle with him, all to overthrow the devil and to win your salvation.

Let us make the Cross, then, the focus of our prayer life. Let the crucified-and-risen Christ comfort and soothe you as you speak your petitions to his heavenly Father—to God who sent his Son so that you might call upon him as *your* heavenly Father. Know that your failures do not define you before God; rather, *Jesus' perfect life and death* define you before God. That includes your prayers.

Yes, God commands you to pray. You could see it as Law. But God doesn't leave you alone with it. The command simply brings you to the foot of the Cross, where you can look up and see the Gospel reality that covers your shortcomings. Prayer, then, becomes a gracious invitation. A means by which God is forming you and molding you. A means to bless you even as he blessed Jacob, for he himself wrestles for you and prays for you.

What a comfort that is for us. What encouragement for us to pray. The Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, gives us everything we need call upon him in prayer, promising that he will use our prayers and our praying for our good.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.