

10.19.2025 Pentecost 19

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Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

“Be persistent in prayer”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today’s reading from Genesis, Jacob wrestles through the night with an unnamed divine stranger. This divine stranger has been called both the angel of the Lord and God. After wrestling through the night, Jacob was also given a new name, Israel, which has two meanings, “one who struggles with God” and “God prevails.” Jacob’s nighttime struggle with God changed him, as God prevailed in his life, blessing him.

After his struggle with God, Jacob was a changed man. Jacob, who had deceived his father Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau; Jacob who started out poor, got the better of Laban, and become rich; Jacob, who only ever cared about Jacob, was changed by God.

God knew that Jacob needed to struggle with God, and this struggle left its mark upon him. He was left with a limp but also given a blessing. After this, Jacob, now named Israel, met his brother Esau and confessing his guilt, sought a new relationship with his brother. Jacob’s nighttime struggle with God made him a bigger person who would no longer live for himself alone.

Like Jacob, other biblical figures also come to mind: The impetuous Peter who in denying Jesus was humbled and the arrogant Saul who had persecuted Jesus. Both were encountered by the risen Jesus, who forgiving them, gave them new identities. Peter became the shepherd of the church, and Saul became the apostle Paul, a missionary carrying the gospel outside of Israel.

The story of Jacob’s nighttime struggle with God is a metaphor for wrestling with God in prayer. Who among us hasn’t woken up during the night to struggle with fear, doubt, regret, or something that needs to be done but you haven’t the confidence or vision to accomplish. At such moments, we might also remember the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, “*Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*” (Mt. 26:36-46). Even Jesus struggled with God in prayer, and he was blessed by carrying the cross for all humanity.

Prayer is often a turning point, blessing us to see ourselves and others anew. Prayer strengthens us to act upon God’s will in our lives. God wants you to pray and God also wants you to act upon your prayers, because prayer will always bless and change you.

Today’s gospel contains a parable about our need “*to pray always and not to lose heart.*” In the parable, a widow relentlessly came before a dishonest judge asking for justice against her accuser. The widow must have been persistent because the unjust judge said, “*I will grant her justice, so that she might not wear me out.*” This phrase, “*so that she light not wear me out*” literally means “so that she doesn’t give me a black eye.” Jesus is describing a prayer life that is hard-hitting, realistic, and

persistent in asking for justice, healing, and hope before God.

What often goes unnoticed is that the widow acted upon her prayerful request: she went to the judge. This suggests not only praying for justice but also working for justice. Jesus is suggesting that we both pray and act upon our prayers. Prayer changes us to become the answer to prayer. If you pray for your enemy, then seek to be reconciled with your enemy. After his struggle with God, Jacob confessed his guilt to Esau and gained back a brother. Be prepared that God will answer your prayer by changing you, causing you act upon your prayer.

So often today, in times of challenge and struggle we hear the phrase, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” Yet without acting, these words ring hollow. If gun violence is a prayer concern for you, then work for an end to gun violence. If you pray for an end to discrimination, then speak up for those who are discriminated against. If you are praying for someone, call them or write them a card – so that your prayerful voice might also encourage them. Persistence in prayer should lead us to be persistent in love, forgiveness, and justice for the weak.

In today’s epistle, Paul encourages Timothy to be persistent and patient in his work for the gospel. So, I ask, are you persistent and patient in both prayer and action for others? Persistence and patience mean that we may have to wait a long time for our prayers to find resolution. I’d like to tell you one such story about prayer, persistence, and patience. In 1828, a Congregational Church prayer group began meeting regularly in the Brookline, Massachusetts home of William Ropes to pray for the spread of the gospel throughout the world. At this first meeting, an offering was taken totaling \$27.87 for future mission work in Japan. In 1828 Japan was a closed nation, yet this didn’t stop this group from praying and gathering offerings for future work in Japan – work that some of them would not live to see. Thirty-one years later, in 1859 trade treaties opened Japan to trade and cultural exchange with western nations, and in 1869, the Congregational Church sent its first missionary, the Rev. Daniel Crosby Greene, to Japan. Daniel Crosby Greene was born in 1843, fifteen years after that first prayer meeting. As this group prayed, the Holy Spirit moved in history, giving birth to both a changed geopolitical landscape and the missionary whom they would send. In 1869, when Rev. Greene was sent to Japan, that initial offering of \$27.87 had grown to \$4000, which, adjusted for inflation, would be worth \$95,300 today.

This prayer group patiently prayed and persistently lived into their prayer. Forty-one years later, when God opened the way, they were prepared to act with a mission fund that helped establish the United Church of Christ Japan and Doshisha University in Kyoto, a top-tier private Christian university. Never underestimate prayer, your actions, or your offerings.

During our 2026 Stewardship Appeal, are we also able to pray, envision, and give toward God’s mission at St. Mark’s? As we pray and work today, we are also preparing for tomorrow’s growth,

preparing to welcome a new associate pastor, Rev. Alexandra Rode and a new chapter in the life of our church. Like Jacob, we are striving with God to maintain and repair our aging church building so that, for many years to come, God's work will continue in this place. Like generations of St. Mark's members before you who prayed and worked, your persistent and patient prayers and your financial gifts continue to make mission happen. Do you pray and give with a faith that trusts in God to act through our church for Christ?

Some years ago, when I was a seminary professor, I remember being invited to lead a weekend retreat at Den-en-chōfu Lutheran Church in Tokyo. On Sunday morning, the pastor, Dr. Miyamoto, preached on the theme, "Prayer changes us," saying that most of us pray expecting God to intervene in life, yet when we are made to wait, we become weary, losing heart because it seems like God doesn't answer our prayers. Yet what we often fail to see is that over time prayer changes us. Like Jacob who was blessed and given a new name, prayer blesses and changes us to be people who struggle alongside of God.

At the close of today's gospel, Jesus speaks about faith, asking, "*And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*" Faith is at the very heart of prayer, linking heaven and earth through the faith that lives in you. Faith is trust in God and faith is God's trust in you.

In his question, Jesus is really asking, "Don't you see that the faith living in you links heaven and earth?" Prayer changes you to trust in and act for God.

Do not lose heart. Be persistent in prayer. Prayer will change you to become the answer to prayer. Have faith in God, because God has faith in you. Amen.