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AMDG

Proper 24C, Pentecost 22 - October 16, 2016

“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. Do we live our lives in faith? Does Jesus find it in us?

This Gospel passage shows us that living one's life in faith requires a constant interaction practice 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 states at the beginning 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 seek God's will, and not our own; and this allows 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 leads 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. 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 justice and mercy, 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- 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 may be the signal that we need to consider our prayer lives.

God has plenty of work for us to do. Feeding the poor, protecting the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, forgiving our enemies. But, 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."