

Earlier this year I got to read a reference letter about me by someone who doesn't really know me. I should explain. They know who I am. We move in the same circles. It's a casual acquaintance, but they were still a valuable reference for my application to a training program and they were kind enough to copy me on their letter. The letter was good, even flattering. But it's not the letter I'd use if someone wants to know me. Because *the emphasis was in all the wrong places*. The emphasis was on certain titles, roles, or numbers. Most of the information was correct. Some of it was inflated. Some of it was just wrong. Overall, it was good. The emphasis was just in the wrong place for anyone who wants to know me.

It's the sort of thing we all do with people we don't really know. And for people of faith, it's also the kind of thing we can do when it comes to God. We all emphasize different aspects of God. And if we're honest, our ideas about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are influenced at least as much by our culture than by our scriptures & traditions. When we hear terms like: power, justice, & love - we all have cultural images that may be even stronger than our Christian images. Whenever we talk about God, it's easy to put the emphasis in the wrong place. It's easy to use language and ideas that are mostly correct, but maybe not very helpful for anyone who wants to know God.

*Today's readings invite us to adjust our emphasis in the life of Christian prayer.* Let's begin with the Gospel. In the Gospel we hear a parable that includes a wildly distorted image of God. We hear a parable that deliberately puts the

emphasis in the all the wrong places. The God-figure in this story is a judge. And that's fine because God cares about justice. But what kind of judge? The emphasis makes all the difference:

this judge is powerful, but corrupt

this judge has authority, but he's indifferent

this judge is supposed to administer justice, but has no respect.

In that kind of wildly distorted image, the only hope for justice is tenacity.

Persistence is the only hope when our lives are controlled by a corrupt, indifferent, or disrespectful figure (remember that when you vote on Nov. 8...). But incredibly, despite all the obstacles, this widow is up for the challenge. Jesus tells us that she "kept coming" & crying for justice.

And remember, in her world, there's no courthouse. They live in a village. She's probably still young, capable, and energetic. Maybe she even has a house full of kids. And this judge is just one villager - an elder - who's responsible to keep things running in their community. So she "kept coming." You bet. We should imagine her showing up at his house morning, noon, and night. We should imagine her following him through the streets, crying for justice so that all their neighbors could hear. We should imagine her so disrupting his life, that even though he doesn't care what anyone thinks - he still feels threatened. He's still afraid that she might bring him down (*remind anyone of some accusations in our election?*).

We're told that Jesus uses the parable not to describe God (*thank heaven!*).

He uses the parable to emphasize the necessity of our prayer. Jesus puts all the emphasis on the necessity to pray and to never lose heart. Because *when we pray it's easy to put the emphasis on God's silence instead of our persistence*. It's easy to assume that God either doesn't hear us or doesn't care. Even if we know all the stories in the Bible, how do we trust them when it feels like God doesn't care? As one theologian says, it's not surprising that some of us pray; what's surprising is that some of us keep praying despite the silence.<sup>1</sup> It's easy to feel abandoned by silence in our prayer.

That feeling runs deep in our world. It even made headlines last year after a mass shooting at another school; after another round of sorrow & rage, the headlines across the country were a quote from President Obama saying that, "Our thoughts & prayers are not enough."<sup>2</sup> He said, "It's not enough" because our thoughts & prayers don't stop the carnage from happening again.<sup>3</sup>

You know what? He's right. President Obama is right, if the emphasis in our prayer is on God's apparent silence. (As if God were some kind of independent contractor at our disposal.) Too often "thoughts & prayers" are just a convenient way of saying we wish things were different. We wish someone would respond (not us, of course). Those "thoughts & prayers" don't change anything.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, *Tell it Slant*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/01/statement-president-shootings-umpqua-community-college-roseburg-oregon>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

So Jesus invites to shift our emphasis. ***He invites us to put all the emphasis on God's character, and on our job to be God's people.*** Jesus invites us to persist because of God's love, and because of our conviction that he's already working in the world. We pray to discover our vocation of sharing God's love - whatever we face.<sup>4</sup> Our prayers are never simply a vague hope for a better world. ***Our prayers are the way we struggle with God's love & learn to participate in God's action to heal the world.*** (repeat)

Look at the story of Jacob in our first reading (Gn. 32.22-31). Jacob is the icon for Christians & Jews, when it comes to a lifelong struggle with God to heal a broken world. Because Jacob is someone who began his life without needing God (or so he thought). Jacob is someone who knew how to get his way. It's kind of a joke, but he even started in the womb. Before Jacob was even born, we're told that he'd grasped his twin brother's heel inside the womb. Jacob always knew how to get his way. If his brother was in line for the inheritance, Jacob just took it away by deceiving their father. ***Jacob is the opposite of the widow who constantly pestered an unjust judge. Because Jacob acted like God wasn't even there.*** No one would look at Jacob as a good reference to know God. The emphasis of his life was always in the wrong place. It was always on him.

But then, after 14 years in a foreign land working off his own mistakes, God finally tells Jacob to go home. And what does Jacob do? You guessed it. He takes

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<sup>4</sup> cf., Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, p.103.

matters into his own hands. He just keeps acting like God isn't there. He tricks his uncle and runs off with his family. Then he arrives at the border of his own land, at the intersection of two rivers: the Jordan & the Jabbok. And even then, he just keeps acting like God isn't there.

He sends a search party to learn about the brother he betrayed. Then he divides his family, his wives and children, into 2 groups so that if his brother attacks them at least Jacob's family will have a chance. After all that; when he's done everything he can think of; he finally sits down at the edge of the rivers to offer up his thoughts and prayers.

He says, *O God* "save me, I pray," (Gn. 32.11). But you know what? It isn't enough. Those *thoughts & prayers* aren't enough. How could they be? He's already taken matters into his own hands. And he just keeps at it. Even after his thoughts & prayers, he sends waves of servants to his brother Esau with a bunch of gifts. And he says, tell my brother that, "Your servant Jacob is coming behind us." Because Jacob thought, "I will pacify [my brother] with these gifts," (Gn. 32:20). Do you hear it? He says *I... will pacify him*. He hasn't changed. He hasn't learned anything about working with God in prayer. He's still acting like God isn't there.

Until finally we hear, in one of strangest passages of scripture; we hear without explanation that "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak," (Gn. 32.24). Here's the point of that strange, strange story. The point is for the first time in his life, Jacob finally had to struggle *with* God for a blessing.

For the first time he couldn't pretend like God wasn't there. For the first time the emphasis on his life with God was finally in the right place.

And Jacob's struggle with God has been the defining image of our prayer ever since. Ever since Jacob and a stranger wrestled at the edge of the Jabbok & Jordan rivers, God's people have been known as the ones who struggle *with* God for some kind of blessing a broken world. Ever since we've been people who struggle *with* God and work *with* God for the healing of our world.

Jacob learned tenacity by struggling with God personally in prayer. Jacob learned, like a widow badgering some crooked judge, that the motivation for our prayer has less to do with God's silence and more to do with God's love. Jacob learned that, "To pray means to [invite] God back into [a broken] world."<sup>5</sup> For Christians it means asking God to complete the healing of our world that began with the life, death, & resurrection of Jesus.

Because for Christians, of course, Jesus himself is what it looks like for God to wrestle with the pain of the world. For Christians Jesus himself is the one who wrestles with God in prayer; Jesus himself is the one mortally wounded in that struggle, when he prays for deliverance and then allows himself to walk the way of the cross to heal the world. We pray because we're following Jesus and offering ourselves to heal the world as the body of Christ. ***God's silence is just the space between God's victory in Jesus and our invitation to be the people of Jesus for***

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

***the world.*** God's silence is simply our invitation to join the struggle.

At the end of Luke's parable, Jesus wonders what his followers will do.<sup>6</sup> He wonders how we'll pray; whether we'll settle for some thoughts & prayers and just go about our day. Or whether we'll devote ourselves to the lifelong struggle for God's healing & justice in a broken world. He wonders whether we'll be people that others can look at if they want to know God. This is the question Jesus asks: *when he comes, will we still be faithful in our struggle to heal the world? Amen.*

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year C* (London: SPCK, 2003), 118.