

“The Jesus Prayer”

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Genesis 32:22-31

Luke 18:1-8

“Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob,
but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans,
and have prevailed.’

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.”

Gen. 32:28-29

Let us pray... O God,

May your name always be on our lips and in our hearts

as an unceasing prayer of praise, confession, thanksgiving, and
desire just to be with you. Amen

It seems ironic that ‘Israel’ refers to someone who
‘struggles with God and others’.

But I think that is a good way of thinking about our faith relationship
with God.

And don’t we struggle with people we love?

Isn’t it often about our expectations of them
or their expectations of us that get us into trouble?

But no matter how disappointed we can be,
we can never quite give up on each other.

Isn’t it a great image for us to personify that struggle
as this man named Jacob wrestles with...
an angel? with God? with himself?

Who he is wrestling with is not really clear,
but it is almost humorous to think of this fellow as being so
determined that even though he is down for the count,
he still won’t give up until he gets a blessing.

He is given the blessing of a new name
that acknowledges something true about him –
not just a label or a nickname.

And when he asks his opponent’s name,
he is given a riddle – or even a joke as an answer:

“Why do you ask to know my name?
You know who I am!”

Willard, p.2

Names were very important back in ancient times –

I imagine it would be similar to the importance we place on
our social security numbers in this society.

It was not something you messed around with or used carelessly
or misrepresented.

To this day, our Jewish brothers & sisters do not say the name of God
as it is written in the Bible, but refer to God as ‘The Lord’ instead.

In Christianity, that tradition took a different turn

with Jesus whose name literally means “Yahweh saves”
or in a way, his name means, “Lord, have mercy” –

The Jesus Prayer. The Kyrie – the Greek hymn of ‘Kyrie, eleison’.

The Jesus Prayer is a tradition that developed

from the Gospel stories and from the prayer practices
of hermit monks down through the centuries since.

Their writings about prayer, meditation, and contemplation

have been used as guides for the generations who followed them.

These were gathered as a book called The Philokalia –

The Love of Spiritual Beauty.

This book is a Christian classic, but plays an important role in

another Christian classic called The Way of a Pilgrim

in which a homeless man wanders throughout Russia
in the early 1800s seeking guidance for how to
‘pray without ceasing’.

He finds a spiritual guide or staretz , who teaches him the discipline
of The Jesus Prayer –

‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have mercy on me.’

He is coached to pray this prayer repetitively,

synchronized with breathing at first a thousand,
then 10 thousand to 20 thousand times

until it becomes an automatic ‘prayer of the heart’.

Then he was given The Philokalia to take with him on his journey
that was both geographical and spiritual

as he sought enlightenment.

The repetitive calling upon the name of God

is also a prayer discipline of the Hindus –

So, the Jesus Prayer could very likely have been shaped

by some encounter between Indian gurus & Christian monks.

Willard, p.3

But I am inclined to think this tradition goes back even further
in human history and development.

I believe it may very well be the first prayer –
'Help me.'

What do we do when it doesn't matter how fast we can run
or how good a shot we are with a bow and arrow,
if there are no herds to hunt.

If there is no food to be found and we are hungry today,
what do we do? Where do we turn?

To whom do we turn for help?
'Lord, have mercy...'

There is no formula of the Jesus Prayer in today's Gospel lesson
about the widow in distress and the harsh judge,
but the element of persistence is there
just like in the story about Jacob
and his unyielding struggle to hang on for God's blessing.

Jesus' parable offers few details,
but we can fill in the blanks from what we know about
how society often treats widows, children,
and others who are relatively powerless.

They need an advocate – and in this case it was the courts
where disputes in society are brought for mediation
when they can't be settled any other way.

We are told at the outset that this fellow is a 'hangin' judge'
who doesn't allow God or compassion for others
to influence him.

Yet it is the woman's persistence that in the end
drives him to distraction and capitulation.

In a way, it is a great example of 'non-violent, direct action'
that led to the achievements of civil rights in this country
and elsewhere in modern times.

Think of the persistence and discipline that was required of
the 33 Chilean miners who had been trapped
a 1/2 mile underground for 70 days, more than 2 months –
and there had been no contact with them
for the first two weeks!

Willard, p.4

Their lives were an example of determination and dependence
on the help that – for then would literally come from above.
And their journey to the light of day was a kind of rebirth.

We are like those miners,
trapped by daily cares and self-defeating ways,
but knowing there is a better world
if we can just keep our heads and keep looking up.
Think of the discipline and persistence of those miners
against the darkness of fear and doubt.

Think of the determination of the whole world above,
bringing its best to bear down on the rock,
to drill down through layers of sediment –
like God relentlessly seeking to connect with us
and to sustain us.

Think of the dependence of the miners on their loved ones,
their caregivers, and even strangers above.

We cry out in prayers that are without words,
like the grinding of teeth, the quickening of the heart,
holding our breath
until we can recognize that we are saying,
'Help me. God, help me'.
and that we have been saying it throughout our lives.

God, help me. Lord, have mercy. Kyrie, eleison.
Kyrie, eleison...

Amen

Genesis 32:22-31

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives,
his two maids, and his eleven children,
and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

23 He took them and sent them across the stream,
and likewise everything that he had.

24 Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he struck him on the 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 is breaking.'

But Jacob said,
'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

27 So he said to him,
'What is your name?'

And he said,
'Jacob.'

28 Then the man said,
'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with humans,
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 place Peniel, saying,
'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel,
limping because of his hip.

Luke 18:1-8

1Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always
and not to lose heart.

2He said,

‘In a certain city there was a judge
who neither feared God nor had respect for people.

3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying,
“Grant me justice against my opponent.”

4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself,

“Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,
5yet because this widow keeps bothering me,

I will grant her justice,

so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’

6And the Lord said,

‘Listen to what the unjust judge says.

7And will not God grant justice

to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long in helping them?

8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

And yet, when the Son of Man comes,

will he find faith on earth?’