

“Pray Always”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

November 10, 2019

Luke 18:1-8

Then 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?”

In 1825, the United States Postal Service started a “dead letter office” to deal with undeliverable mail. In recent years, more than 90 million undeliverable items end up at this office annually. This is included in the classic film *Miracle on 34th Street* when mail addressed to Santa Claus gets sent to Kris Kringle at the courthouse. At the real “dead letter office,” which is now called the much less interesting name “mail recovery center,” mail arrives when it is not clearly addressed and the sender’s identity is unknown. There the letter is opened and its contents examined for clues to the sender’s identity. If the return address cannot be determined, the letter is destroyed. It never reaches its destination, and whatever communication was attempted by the writer does not reach anyone.

Have you ever felt that way about praying? Have you ever felt that somehow your prayers must have been mis-addressed and so they just never made it anywhere at all? Have you felt like you were talking and talking, but nobody was listening? That’s how the widow in today’s gospel lesson must have felt, and I think if we’re honest, most of us have felt that way at some point ourselves.

The widow in today’s Gospel reading had to be tired of coming back to this judge, over and over again, getting nowhere. Her request ended up in the dead letter office, time and time again. And yet, she was relentless. She kept on. We don’t know the particulars of her story. We know that she was a widow, which automatically put her in a difficult place in Biblical times. How often do we read about taking care of “widows and orphans” in the Bible? In the patriarchal system of the day, widows had no one to protect them or to care for them. So, the widow was supposed to be a protected person, but in this case she was the victim of some injustice. And the judge who she went to just ignored her. The judge has words I just find humorous – the judge actually says to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone” or as it is paraphrased in *The Message*: “I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think.” It seems like such a reality

would be more of an unconscious factor in his life than a spoken thought, but this judge is apparently well aware that he “has no fear of God and no respect for anyone.” Even so, *this* judge eventually gives in and grants justice to the widow, because he just can’t bear to listen to her anymore. “GRANT ME JUSTICE!” she keeps yelling at him. And justice prevails! It prevails for all the wrong reasons, though. The judge does not grant her justice because it is the right thing to do. The judge grants her justice because she keeps bugging him. The original Greek used in the phrase “she will wear me out” actually means “strike under the eye.” In other words, *give a black eye*. The judge says that this woman is going to give him a black eye if he doesn’t give in to her. The judge grants her justice only because he doesn’t want to deal with her anymore. The judge is still unjust. The judge still doesn’t fear God. The judge still doesn’t have respect for people. He simply relented against the torment of this woman who bugged him so.

Is *that* what God is like? Is Jesus telling us that God doesn’t want to help us, but if we annoy God enough with our prayers, then God will do what we ask? No, I don’t believe that’s what Jesus had in mind. Some parables are allegories, where each character represents something else. Other parables, like today’s parable, are the kind that is called a “*how much more*” parable. There’s a similar parable just a few chapters back in Luke, where we read “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” How much *more*! This parable is not a comparison of God to the judge. It is a *contrast* of God *against* the judge. The judge is unjust and yet he does the right thing eventually. *How much more*, then, will our gracious and loving God do what is right? It is a story of God’s goodness, not a story of God’s reluctance to do good and our need to pester God into it.

It is also a story about persistence. But the text we read today does not say “you must continually tell God what you want so that God will relent and do what you want.” That is not the persistence that the parable tells us about. The persistence is for *our own* sake. Praying is not really about telling God what it is that we want. I once attended a conference where Tony Campolo was the featured speaker and he spoke a bit about prayer. He said we usually pray all wrong. We’ll say, “God, Sister Mary is in the hospital.” And God responds, “*Really?!?! Which hospital?*” No, God knows exactly what is going on already. God knows what we want and what we need. Praying is not really about telling God what is going on in our lives. It is about communing with God. It is about focus on God and God’s plans for the world so that our will gradually becomes more and more in tune with God’s will. That is hard work! In a society which advertises things for us to desire and tells us to put our desires above all else, it is hard work to set aside those desires – some petty and some not-so-petty – in order to focus on the will of God. *God wants to give us good things.* I’m just not so sure that God wants to give us luxury cars and fancy meals and all the things we see advertised relentlessly all around us. Those things aren’t inherently bad, but they probably aren’t at the top of God’s priority list for us. We are to be persistent in prayer because Jesus knows that is the only way that our will can become attuned to God’s will, instead of attuned to the will of the corporations that want us to consume their products. We are to be persistent because opening our hearts to God and listening to God’s heart is something that takes much practice.

But I think there is another dimension to this parable. Jesus mentions people who “cry to him day and night.” Why are they *crying*? The people that Jesus mentions are probably, like this widow, victims of injustice. They are crying out, day and night, because justice has so long eluded them. Isn’t that what we see in our world? Don’t we see that justice in our world is so often denied to those who most need it? The news shows us that the rich and the powerful often get

away with crime with little more than a slap on the wrist, while the poor, who have no access to fancy lawyers, so often get lengthy sentences. That is where we come into the picture. We are to help in bringing justice to those who have known no justice. This parable is about our role in helping to spread justice on this earth. When others cry out day and night, we are to respond.

At that conference years ago, Tony Campolo told us about a former student of his at Eastern University, where Campolo taught for many years. Bryan Stevenson was a star student, committed to scholarship and to Jesus Christ. After he graduated from Eastern, Bryan Stevenson went on to Harvard Law School and graduated in the top of his class. He could have a very lucrative career in corporate law, living a luxurious lifestyle. Instead, he chose to go to Montgomery, Alabama, to be a Public Defender. You might have heard of him, or read his excellent book called *Just Mercy*. In Alabama, he serves as defense counsel for people who could not possibly afford a brilliant, Harvard-trained lawyer, but they get Bryan Stevenson for free. Stevenson said that all too often, poor people don't receive justice. They are the recipients of *injustice*, just like the poor widow Jesus told us about. Campolo quoted Bryan Stevenson as saying, "not in Montgomery, Alabama. Here they get *me* – and I'm *good!*"

We are to find those victims of injustice, those who Jesus said are *crying out day and night*, and we are to join them in their crying out. We are to join them in their quest for justice.

A young man in Africa asked his minister why his people had to suffer so much poverty, hardship, and oppression. "Why doesn't God do something?" he asked his pastor. The wise pastor responded to the young man, "He has! He created *you!*" That young man was Desmond Tutu and he did something, eventually becoming Archbishop of South Africa and one of the world's strongest voices against apartheid. He spent time in prayer, probably *persistent* prayer like Jesus told us in this Gospel lesson, and he came up with the answer to that question – Why doesn't God do something? God *is* doing something, and that something involves each of us. *We* are the

solution. We are to work to ensure justice for the widows and everyone else in God's world who is not experiencing justice. We are to work to end war and inequality. We are to spread God's blessings to those who have not yet experienced them.

Prayer, *persistent prayer* like Jesus taught us, is not about God giving us things. It is about persistently calling on the name of God, day after day, hour after hour, until our will is attuned to the will of God. It is about persistently working toward justice for those who lack justice. It is persistently seeking the kingdom of God, and it is something that we should be doing at all times, not putting off until later.

Several years ago, I was working on a sermon in a coffee shop in the town where I was serving as pastor of a congregation. While there, I got a call from a member of the congregation, saying that they had been told that fire trucks had been dispatched to the church building. There had been a vehicle accident right beside the church building, and the vehicle was on fire. The building might be, as well. I hurriedly gathered my belongings and went to the register to pay for my snack. Hoping to rush the owner along so she would ring up my food quickly, I mentioned why I was heading out and asked her to pray for the person in the vehicle. My strategy backfired. Instead of hurrying up, she slowed down. She reached her hand over the cash register and said, "why don't we pray *now*?" And, a bit embarrassed that I had to be taught that lesson, I grabbed her hand and we prayed.

Prayer is to be persistent, it is to be constant, and it is to be a part of each moment of our lives. This is the rare parable that tells us at the beginning what it is about. Luke introduces the parable with this line: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." We are to pray *always* so that we are – more and more – attuned to the will of God. And we are not to lose heart, because, as Jesus reminds us, God is with us. So, let us follow what

Jesus asked of us. Pray always; don't lose heart. I have a feeling the first just might lead us to the second. Amen.