

TO PRAY ALWAYS

Luke 18: 1-8

Have you ever felt powerless or hopeless about a situation in your life? Have you ever felt powerless or hopeless about justice in the world? Have you ever felt like giving up? How have you found your way through?... Has prayer helped?... But how have you prayed?... How have you asked?...

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus tells a parable. Why does he tell it? Let me quote the opening words: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

“To pray always...” Elsewhere in the New Testament we’re told we should “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), “persevere in prayer” (Romans 12:12), “pray in the Spirit at all times” (Ephesians 6:18). But why would we pray like this unless we believe that something good can come out of it? How can we pray like this unless we have the energy within us and perhaps the hope that justice is possible in some way in this world and the next?

Clearly, the parable Jesus tells is intended to encourage us and maybe even activate us to pray always and not lose heart. And in case we miss that point, after he tells the parable, Jesus says this: “when the Son of humanity returns, will he find faith on earth?” In other words, will people have kept praying always and without ceasing, persevering in prayer, and praying in the Spirit at all times? Or will they have given up in despair, having lost their faith and hope?

Part of it is how we think of prayer. Is prayer just words? Or is prayer about all of life? How do we pray with our hearts as well as our minds, our bodies, and our spirits? Can art be prayer? Can music be prayer? Can anger and protest and marching be prayer? Can advocacy and engagement be prayer? Can lament and weeping be prayer? Can daily rituals we do to care for ourselves or someone else be a kind of prayer that we do declaring that we will not give up or give in no matter what? Can it be prayer when we pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off? Can prayer be a kind of passion that arises within us as we engage another person or open our hearts to receive from them?

The short answer is yes, absolutely! Jesus, the son of humanity, calls us to make our whole living a kind of prayer, to fashion all we do with our minds, our hearts, our spirits, and our bodies as a kind of prayer. And to illustrate at least something of what this can mean, Jesus tells this little parable that is revolutionary dynamite. So, what does this parable say?

First we're told there is a judge in some city and we're also told that this judge neither fears God nor has respect for people. This means he is corrupt. This means if he does anything it will have to be for money. Who's got money to bribe him? Or else it's about influence and power. Who has the kind of influence and power that would make it desirable for this judge to rule in their favour?

But then, we're also told that there is this widow who keeps coming to him to petition him to grant her some justice against an opponent. Now, it's easy for us to read this parable as a personal one on one situation. But this is not simply what this parable is about. Those in power with privilege in Jesus' world are all too often corrupt. And because they have the power, there is no recourse to force them into accountability.

Think of Vladimir Putin. Who can force him to be accountable? Who has enough money or influence or power to make it desirable for him to yield? But then there is Benjamin Netanyahu. What will force him to yield to some greater justice? And what about Donald Trump? Will the American democratic system find a way to hold him accountable for what he has done and is doing? And what about so many in power even in our own nation? Even as accountability does happen, there's much that many with power, privilege and money get away with.

On the other hand, who is the widow? What does she represent? A woman without a man in her world is the most vulnerable and powerless kind of person. The vast majority of people drawn to Jesus are those vulnerable, crying out for some justice. But who is listening? Who cares? Does anyone in power care? What can the vulnerable do before those with the power and control other than give them their labour. Everything else has been taken – their land, many of their children and family and anything else they have to give.

And obviously, the social challenges represented in this parable are also magnified as individual challenges for persons within families and communities. What can I as a person do to get some justice, to get someone to listen? If I am a person of colour will I get the same hearing as a white person? If I don't have money or a good job with solid benefits, will I be able to get the right kind of legal help and pay for it? If I don't have some organization or family with some influence and resources backing me up, will I get a hearing? Who you are as a person just like who you are in the world makes a huge difference. Is the life of a Palestinian child any less valuable than a Jewish one? Is the value of an indigenous person or a refugee among us less valuable than a Canadian citizen with means? Clearly before God they are even if in our world they often are not.

OK, but here's where the parable gets even more interesting. The judge, for all his indifference to justice and disrespect for the humanity of persons, gives way to this poor widow. He grants her justice. Why? She has no money to bribe him and no power, status or connections to

influence him. But what she does have is her persistence. She will not give up and she will not give in. She will protest and make noise and demand justice. She will sleep at the judge's front door. She will follow him and make it so uncomfortable for him he will give her justice just to be rid of her. Wow! Obviously this is a parable. In the real world this widow would have disappeared. We know all too well what happens to protesters if they disrupt the business and pleasure of people of influence!

But Jesus has a point to make here. Jesus combines the idea of prayer with justice and with faith. We keep praying because we believe it can make a difference. Prayer empowers us. We pray and our faith in what's possible is enlarged. We pray because we believe in justice despite the unjust structures and indifference of those at the top of them. The key question Jesus ends the parable with is the one we need to ask ourselves: when the son of humanity returns (whenever that is) will he find faith on earth? Will there be any faith left among us after years and years of praying for justice with apparently little progress or results?

You see the key here is faith. Faith in a higher justice doesn't guarantee the systems of this world will adhere to such justice. We pray anyway because prayer makes us alive. It gives us focus. We pray because we care, and we care because we love. We build networks of caring with one another. We sow seeds, we build relationships and we build lives even as injustice continues to be alive and well all around us. We believe that injustice has a time limit on it. Eternity is on the side of justice. "Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven" that we pray every week is a call for the return of the son of humanity whenever and however we glimpse that here and there when justice happens.

But there's more, too. The parable reminds us that even unjust judges can sometimes yield to justice. Why? Because those who care don't give up. We keep agitating and protesting and quietly praying and caring and loving and serving... We bear witness by our faith through prayer and service that love is alive and God's kingdom is planting seeds in this world. It's not all hopeless as certain situations in certain places do seem so hopeless. There is also goodness and it can be inspired and activated by the Spirit of Jesus however that Spirit is revealed through people of faith wherever they come from and whatever creed they profess. We know what the Spirit of Jesus looks like even when it has another name. It's always about love and compassion, the energy for justice, outrage at injustice, care and concern for the vulnerable, the downtrodden and those who are mistreated because they don't fit into majority opinion or appearance... The Spirit of Jesus is alive when there is persistent praying, protesting, advocating, agitating, caring, and serving, and a refusal to retaliate in vengeance because then we become the enemy we are fighting...

So then, the question Jesus asks remains a question each of us must answer for ourselves: When the son of humanity returns, whether that is before we die or after we die, will we be found with faith in our hearts?... How do you answer? Amen.