

FAITH, PRAYER, PERSISTENCE

Psalm 4; Luke 18: 1-8

One of the best books I've read is entitled: *"Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)"* by Kate Bowler. It was a New York Times Bestseller and received much acclaim. A big part of the acclaim is due to the fact that the author is telling her own story in real time, a story of stage 4 colon cancer in her late 30s. But what also makes it a fascinating read is Bowler's background itself. She is a historian. Her research as a historian is also focussed on what has been called the "prosperity gospel." Even though the prosperity gospel is preached in mega churches all over the world, it's origins are rooted in the U.S. The prosperity gospel is one of the biggest cultural exports of the U.S. to the world.

What is the prosperity gospel? It teaches that the bible promises all good things to those who have faith. If you believe hard enough and pray persistently for blessings in your life and even for specific blessings like health, wealth, your ideal mate and other things besides, good things will come your way. Gleaned from many biblical passages interpreted in a superficial way, the prosperity gospel proclaims a theology that teaches that success and prosperity are marks of God's blessing, while failure, illness and disaster are due to poor praying and believing. Unless you truly believe you will not experience blessings and God is a God who wants to bless all God's children. Failure to connect with God rightly, however or a sinful lifestyle, will lead to punishment rather than blessing.

Now even though Kate is a critical historian, her research exposed her to evangelical churches where the prosperity gospel is proclaimed and believed. The allure of the prosperity gospel is obvious, no? It promises good things and it provides a simple formula for how to get good things. God is an instrument to your greater health, wealth and success in your relationships and your workplace. The key is faith and prayer, and prayer with persistence. A bad outcome is the result of lack of faith, lack of persistent praying, or some sin in your life blocking God's good favour.

But is such a faith and such a formula for prayer believable? Maybe if you're desperate enough. What if it works? But it's much more difficult to embrace prosperity theology if you want to be honest about your vulnerability, your imperfections, and the truth that way too much in life is not in your control as a human being. Bad things are not the result of a lack of faith or poor praying. No. Kate's more recent book is actually entitled: *"No Cure for Being Human: and Other Truths I need to hear."* Bad things happen, and we have to discover a whole other way into praying and believing.

Kate's story is a fascinating one. She says she was drawn in by the prosperity gospel even as she was researching it for her doctorate. What if it was true? She married her high school sweetheart, landed a coveted position as a historian in a major U.S. seminary, and much that was good was coming her way. It must have been the persistent praying and believing. The

first snag she and her husband faced, however, was their desire to have children. Try as they did and with lots of medical help, failure, setback and sorrow was what they experienced. Had they not prayed hard enough, the right way and with persistence?

But then, miracle of miracles, Kate got pregnant and she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. Well, she thought, as they say, God never gives you a challenge you cannot find a way through, and perhaps the challenge and setback were essential to making her a more persistent prayer and believer. There's always a reason if you want to believe there is.

But then, serious trouble came her way: The big C. And not the "curable" kind either. Stage 4 colon cancer was the diagnosis. Kate wanted truth from her doctor. Two years if your fortunate, she was told. But you must read her account of all this because it's so beautifully written and with humour as much as pathos. The rest of the book is her learning what her disease is teaching her and how she may find a way to God through prayer in a whole other way than the prosperity gospel.

So what's the alternative to the prosperity gospel? Let's explore our scripture readings.

Let's begin with Psalm 4. This psalm could easily be coopted into a prosperity gospel reading. It begins with a prayer: "Answer me when I call, O God of my right!.. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer." So what is it the psalmist praying for? It's not clear what exactly is distressing the psalmist but it's the kind of trouble that involves people abusing the psalmist and the psalmist's people. In fact, the trouble is so prolonged and persistent, many people are losing faith: "There are many who say, 'O that we might see some good.'"

The psalm is both a prayer to God with renewed vigour, and it is a call for people not to give up on God. It assures the people that God will answer them and vindicate them against their foes: "Know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for God's self; The Lord hears when I call." But finally, the power in this psalm is that it already anticipates God's answer to prayer: "You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

Ok, so what kind of answer to prayer does the psalmist experience? The prosperity gospel would have an easy answer. The psalmist is praying for freedom from their foes, for vindication and blessing. Their foes must see how their God, their faith and their prayer is effective in getting victory. Their God is a God who can make things happen. If it happens for the psalmist it will happen for anyone who follows the psalmist's example. Pray with persistence. Believe with heart-felt resolve. Cleanse yourself of any wrong doing. God will answer and God will bless.

But how will God bless? What kind of answer to prayer does the psalmist receive? "You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." You see, the psalmist prays for one thing, but the answer comes in a different way. The answer for the psalmist is

to transform their thinking about what blessing is truly about. It's not about material blessing over their foes. It's not about grain and wine. Sure that's nice to have and we all need some grain and wine to live.

But if that's what my foe is building up as what they have over me and if that's what they throw in my face, God's love-energy flowing into me has shifted my perspective 180 degrees. God has put gladness in my heart that is not tied to having more grain and wine. Material blessing is not the be all and end all. Gladness and peace is an internal thing. I free myself from what someone else has more than me or over me and uses that to sting me. I feel full in my re-invigorated connection with the ground of my being and I feel free because I don't have that grinding need for more and better.

People may pray for material blessing, especially as they see their neighbours flourishing. But here, the prayer for more and better gets the answer of being liberated from such a toxic desire. Gladness of heart, peace and fullness do not come from material things. The answer to prayer is inner transformation and spiritual growth. You see the difference?

OK, but we have an even greater challenge with our gospel reading. We're told that Jesus tells the people a parable "about their need to pray always and not lose heart." There are often terrible material and health challenges in our lives as well as grave injustices we must live. If I were indigenous or black or gay or trans, my praying to God and believing is also about justice and well being that is external as much as internal. Inner transformation alone is not enough. I need to see some justice and human rights in order to experience some dignity and quality of life.

OK, in the example Jesus uses in his parable, the main character is a widow. It's bad enough being taken seriously as a woman in Jesus' world, but a widow is someone on her own, unattached to a man who could provide for her and advocate for her. She is on her own, she counts little in society and she has absolutely no power on the outside to change her situation or, in this case, get some justice for wrongs she has clearly suffered. Sounds like so many women we hear about even today in a society like ours, no?

But what happens in the parable. This widow has not lost heart. She is on fire. She is persistent, stubbornly and tenaciously so. She refuses to give up. What gives her that kind of faith that, somehow, justice is possible? We're not told. What we are told is that the appointed judge to whom she is making her appeal for justice is someone who cares little about justice. He's there to collect bribes and feed his own self-serving needs. The widow has no money and no social influence to benefit him. And so, her demand for justice and her appeal against the system mean nothing to him, and in fact, he may have benefitted from the very unjust systems and people that has caused the widow's troubles.

And yet, what is truly astonishing is that the widow ends up getting justice. Why? Because the judge can't take her harassment any more. He says this to himself: "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will

grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” Wow! If any protest movement needed evidence that persistence pays off, this parable is it! Don’t give up and don’t give in, it says. Keep at it. Justice can only come in a world of injustice by persistent praying, persistent believing, and persistent protesting!

OK, but prayer is directed to God, No? Isn’t it God who changes things? Well, it’s certainly not God who changes the judge’s mind. It was the actions of this widow that did it. Her persistent believing and praying for justice did it.

OK, but if I were a prosperity gospel believer, how would I read this parable? Jesus is saying that if an unjust judge grants the petition of this poor widow’s prayer, how much more will a just God give all good things to those who pray persistently with faith.

But hold on a minute. The hero of this parable is the widow. Praying and believing has empowered her to become bold in demanding justice. She will not give up or give in. She is on fire. How can prayer and faith do that in her? In a world of injustice, God works by putting that kind of fire and that kind of faith into us. The widow is transformed by her praying and believing and she doesn’t just sit at home waiting for God to magically change the judge’s mind and grant her justice. That’s not the way prayer works.

Jesus ends by saying this: “When the Son of humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?” In other words, will he find people fighting for justice, being transformed internally so that their desires and passions are not about material gain, prosperity and success, but about aligning their hearts’ desires with God’s vision for our world. Will praying and believing in God’s transforming power be answered by us being changed, by becoming more alive, more grounded in what truly matters, more hopeful even when we’re often fighting an uphill battle, and more aligned with God’s vision of love, justice and healing for this world? Will God find anyone who hasn’t given up because they believe love is the most powerful force in the universe?

If we are spiritually alive, we will pray and pray persistently. We pray persistently because we believe it can make a difference. The answer is not just changing our situation with a snap of some magical, divine fingers. No. The answer is all about us being somehow empowered, changed, consoled yet also deepened with a harder resilience, so that we become ever more what we want to see in the world. It’s about growing in what we pray for and widening our imagination for what answer to prayer looks like.

Are you missing the answer to your prayer because you have lost faith and hope and there is no passion left in your praying? Are you missing the answer to your prayer because you’re looking for a very specific answer and any other answer is no answer you want to accept or work with?

May prayer and the persistent faith that must fuel it, become a source of ongoing healing and transformation for you... God is alive and present and flowing in a world where there is

great injustice and much that is not in our control. How do we become part of the answer to our prayer in who we are becoming, in our convictions and passions, changing in what matters to us and our capacity to love in a way that changes us as much as the world around us? God's answer to our prayers must involve change and growth in us becoming part of that answer.

What do you pray about? How has prayer changed you? May God flow into you and transform you as you keep praying to God for justice, healing and the victory of love. Pray for fire in you. Pray for resilience in you. Pray for perspective so that you see the sunshine beyond the clouds and experience the healing rays flowing through you... Amen.