

Sermon: "Does Prayer Really Work"

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said 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 continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you; he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Just when you think you have Jesus figured out as a teacher, a healer, and a man of prayer, he goes and tells a story like this. Who knew Jesus was a comedian too? It is not hard to imagine his listeners throwing their heads back and slapping their knees as they laugh at this ridiculous tale. A woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten politician who could care less about her plight, until finally he sticks his head out the window and shouts, "All right, already! Knock it off! I will give you what you want if you just shut up!" They laugh because they know this woman. She always gets a raw deal, because she has nothing – no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. They know this judge too, the one who is only out for himself. No public servant, this one, they laugh at the idea of one of their own, this powerless woman, annoying the smug guy everyone loves to hate until, finally, he does something good in spite of himself. Good story! They laugh, and then they sigh, and they remember that Jesus told them that this is what prayer is like.

By now Jesus may even have our congregation's attention too. How many of our congregation hammer away at God's door, but to no apparent avail? The mother of young children is struck down by cancer, and so we pray and pray and pray, but death comes anyway. We are worn out from praying for comfort and relief in the wake of yet another storm or natural disaster. The radio and TV brings news of more war casualties, even though we continually pray for peace. Is this really the way it is supposed to be?

Ministers know, perhaps more clearly and poignantly than anyone else, that prayers are not always answered, if by answering we mean the fulfillment of the specific request of the one praying. Ministers know the experience of powerlessness standing by the bedside of a critically ill patient whose family members are praying for healing, hoping the minister will pray for a healing miracle, and knowing that healing is, in all probability, not going to happen. Ministers know that question, "Does prayer really work?" is heavy with emotion and that its answer must be anything but simple.

People seem to want to believe that God will intercede at our urging and do what we want God to do. God is regularly given credit for finding a new job, selling a condo for profit in a buyer's market, a convenient parking place even. Super Bowl champions thank God who secured their victory, though we hear very little from the loser's locker room on the subject. The winner of the lottery, unemployed, down to his last eight dollars, offered up a prayer, "Help me Lord,...Just let me win this," and gave God credit for the \$295 million jackpot. In 1Chronicles, a heretofore unmentioned man by the name of Jabez is remembered as the one who prayed: "oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you keep me from hurt and harm!" (1Chr 4:10). God complied, and on that basis some twenty-first century Christians are persuaded that God has unclaimed blessings for us, that God wants us to be selfish in our prayers, that it is appropriate to ask God to increase the value of your stock portfolio, and that God will open the storehouse of heaven if you pray persistently.

When the consequences of belief are worldly goods, such as health, fixing on these, turns religion into a service station for self-gratification and churches into health clubs.

Jesus told a parable about persistent prayer. We need to remember it is a parable, not an anecdote about two people everybody knows. Luke even tells us the purpose of the parable is: the disciples' need "to pray always and not lose heart" (v.1). From the start, Jesus sets out, not to resolve the mystery of answered and unanswered prayer, but to teach his disciples persistence. It is a delightful story about two unforgettable characters: a harsh judge utterly without conscience who "Neither feared God nor had respect for people" and a widow who is poor, helpless, defenseless, and in need of justice. It is a parable, not an allegory, even if we might chuckle at Jesus' freedom to picture the petitioned party so negatively; and no details are provided about the widow's case. The scene must be something like a hall of justice, a judge seated on the dais, throngs of petitioners gathered about, some represented by lawyers, others just shouting their requests from the crowd.

The woman is in the crowd every day when the court convenes. She wants "vindication" against an unnamed adversary. Every day she asks for justice, shouts for justice. Every day the judge ignores her. Maybe she follows him home and repeats her request nightly and the first thing in the morning. She nags and badgers; she is relentless. Finally realizing that he is encountering some kind of primal

force, that she is not going to give up, the judge relents and renders a favorable judgement. "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" Jesus asks (v.7). So, we must remember that the issue here is justice, not using God to get what one wants or needs – unless, of course, we understand that what God knows we need and what we think we want are not at all the same things.

I had two good and loving parents. They did not give me everything I wanted. I asked for a horse, a dog, a two-wheel bicycle before I was old enough to ride it. One Christmas I had my heart set on a toy drum set I found in the Sears catalog. My requests were heard and turned down. In retrospect, I understand that I received, not always what I most wanted, but what I most needed.

That is at least part of what Jesus is teaching his disciples, and us, in this parable. The early church, which first read it, certainly prayed for many things it did not receive safety, protection from persecution, for instance. It did receive what it most needed: a sense of God's loving presence and attentiveness, and the strength and resilience and fortitude it needed to survive. Count on God to come down on the side of justice. Count on God to hear the ones who have no power, no influence, no voice. Count on God to hear those who have nowhere else to turn. Count on God not always to grant your request, but to hear, with loving, parental patience, the persistent prayers of your heart. Jesus says, "God will not delay. God will help. God will grant justice." If the Son of Man is to find faith on earth, we must understand that our prayers do not constitute so many unanswered pleas; rather, they are our participation in the coming reign of God.

By praying continually, and not giving up Hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.

PRAYER:

Eternal God, restore life to the dead. Give us a voice, your own voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world. You, Light, give us light.
You, wisdom, give us wisdom. You, supreme strength, strengthen us. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Jesus seems to anticipate our dilemma when he wonders aloud whether, when he comes again, if anyone will still have faith. Effectively, he turns the tables. "Stop speculating about when I will return and start praying faithfully now." Wondering when the Lord will return is a good question, and it is precisely because of this question that Jesus tells this parable about the "need to pray always and not to lose heart"