

Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Wearing out God's Ear

Luke 18:1-8

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Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray. It's hard to imagine someone who doesn't see any reason to pray, for that would be someone void of any hurt, any desire, any gratitude. I don't know anyone like that. Certainly *all* of us at some point in our lives have had need to say, "Help me. Help me. Help me," or "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."¹

Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray and not lose heart. It's the losing heart that I get. For "when we go all the way down, our deepest problem with prayer is that we lose heart."² We're puzzled at how long our prayers go unanswered, and that question eats away at the edges of our hearts. You can only knock so long at a closed door before your knuckles get bloody. You can only listen to yourself speak into silence so long before you start to wonder if anyone is there.³ If we are honest, if *I* am honest, we wonder if prayer matters, which makes us wonder if *we* matter. And we just lose heart,

So, Jesus tells us a parable, a story about a judge and a widow. Let me do a little teaching with you here. In biblical times, judges were those responsible for giving people a fair hearing, making legitimate peace between one person and another. *Weaker* members of the community were dependent upon them and only them. There were no juries. A judge's duty was to give justice, and the justice was seen as God's. So you better believe that judges knew the Torah, the scripture, like the back of their hand.

And the scripture, well, it is always talking about widows, for widows were the most vulnerable among the people. Time and time and time again the Torah says things like "the Lord your God is a God of gods, who executes justice for the orphan and widow."⁴ Time and time and time again, the Prophets demand things like "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."⁵ All this is to say that we all, especially judges, as they were in a position to help, best be paying attention to widows.

But the parable says that the judge "neither feared God nor had respect for people." This guy has gotten it all wrong. He is wholly unsuited for his calling. It's like saying that there was a chef who did not know how to melt butter, or there was a lifeguard who could not swim. He's just plain rotten. And yet, this judge ends up doing the right thing. He does the right thing—not for any noble reason, not because God demands it of him or that his job description requires it or even because he has a soft spot for this needy woman; he does the right thing because *he's annoyed. . . bothered.*

This widow woman *will not give up*; she is wearing out this judge's ear, filling up his inbox, stalking his house, refusing to let it be. The judge says, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out."

But what the Greek says, literally, is, "I will grant her justice *so she will not strike me under the eye.*" It's language used in the boxing arena.⁶ This judge does the right thing because he doesn't want to end up with a black eye. And what Jesus says is that

if this *rotten* judge, this seemingly *soulless creature*, will do right by this widow, *how much more* will God do right by us? Do not lose heart, God will grant us justice; it's inevitable. Just keep wearing out God's ear and do not lose heart.

I have early childhood memories of my dad asking me inane questions when I asked him something that was inevitable.

He'd say: "Does the sun shine? Does the moon beam?"

He did it all the time. "*Daaad*," I'd say, "*Of course* the sun shines, *of course* the moon beams, but I'm asking you if you'll read over my English paper when you finish dinner?"

Nowadays he doesn't even have to get past the word *does*, and I know the cadence, tone, and inflection that is coming. Will *All Things Considered* be on in his car radio at 4:30? Will he set out the breakfast cereal before he goes to bed? *Does the sun shine?* Will he drive out here when his grandchild is born? Will he be willing to talk me through a tough day of ministry? *Does the moon beam?*

This parable, I think, calls us back to that part of us that can say *of course* God is listening, *of course* God cares about the hurt of our hearts, *of course* the God of goodness is at work among us to mend what is broken, right what is wrong, and draw closer the day God has indeed promised. *Does the sun shine? Does the moon beam?* This parable is intended to quell our fear and renew our faith.

But there is more to say today about God and prayer and persistence, for parables are rarely one layered. They're hard to exhaust. A number of years' ago, I was at a conference in Montreat. It was a small conference, and the leadership was talking about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. To get us into the story, the conferees were invited to stand in triads and "stand in the shoes" of one of three characters: the Father, the Prodigal, or the Elder brother. Each triad had to arrange themselves into a type of still life and just let the role sink in for a few minutes of silence. It was an interesting practice of reading scripture.

With today's parable, I think I've always seen myself as the nagging widow. Those are the "shoes" I've stood in, for *I've* tried to bother God. I've bothered God with my pleas: pleas for a child, pleas for peace if a child wasn't in the cards. I've worn out God's ear with pleas for guidance when I've felt stuck and courage when I've felt scared and hope when I've felt hopeless. I've railed against God with my anger at the way the world isn't fair and the way the world isn't nice and the way the world doesn't make sense to me.

I've raised my voice and sometimes even my fists when I felt like I wasn't getting heard. I've told God, "I love you, but I'm mad at you. I am mad at you!"⁷ But to put my feet in the shoes of that rotten judge and to imagine that God is the widow instead? Now that's a reversal!

If we stand this parable on its head and hear it as a testimony to the *persistence of God*, what would that mean for us? Might this parable speak to the persistent, unrelenting, determined One who keeps knocking on *our* door, challenging us to respond, urging us to *be* the answers of our neighbors prayers?⁸ If we think about it, God has, in fact, always been compassion-obsessed, justice-minded, mercy-driven.

Perhaps God, standing in widow's shoes, will not stop clamoring for our attention, will not stop hounding until *we* come around right. Perhaps your image of God doesn't jive with that of an old woman who is insufferable enough to knock us in the eye to get our attention, but for me, the persistent, determined One is *my hope*. For

it means *that God will not give up on even us*. Let me say that again: it means that God will not give up on us. And *that* helps me not lose heart. Our incessant God will not let us stay as those who “neither fear God nor have respect for people.” God will not allow us to get comfortable in the unjust judge’s shoes. Perhaps we’ll start listening because we don’t want to end up with a black eye; perhaps we’ll drag ourselves off our happy couches because we’re tired of that insistent knock. Or, finally worn down—we’ll just flat give in and be the answer to someone else’s prayer.

I’ll never forget one of our “Why Village Matters” moments. I’ll never forget Dr. John Hall, member of this church and salt of the earth guy. He stood up and said, “My name is Dr. John Hall and Thursday afternoon I got *another obnoxious* email from Mason Ormsby.” (It took me a minute to realize he was really using the word “obnoxious” in reference to another church member, right there in the broad daylight of the sanctuary.) John told us that Mason’s email had indicated that there weren’t enough doctors for Saturday’s shift at the Kansas City Free Health Clinic. John read that email and thought: “I am tired.” But Mason’s email said, “We’ll schedule some patients for you.” Good Lord, he was unrelenting!

John went that Saturday, and he met a client named Mr. Tanakas who has lived in Kansas City for seven years on a green card. Mr. Tanakas was complaining about a problem of his wrists. John fumbled through the man’s chart. There was no mention of wrists, but notes about tests run for AIDS, anemia, thyroid disease, hepatitis, leukemia—all of which turned out negative. No one had found anything wrong with this man.

“You are thin.” John said.

“That’s it, that’s it,” and Mr. Tanakas showed John his wrists.

“Do you have digestive issues?”

“No”

“Do you vomit?”

“No”

“Do you eat?”

“No”

Awkward, awkward pause.

“Would you eat if you had food?”

“Yes”

“Do you have food?”

“No”

John figured out how to get Mr. Tanakas emergency food stamps and set him up to get into our Food Pantry that Monday. And John charted the first case of starvation he had ever diagnosed. John’s speech that morning concluded with a word of *thanks* to Mason Ormsby, who every single week sends out email reminders, incessant reminders. He said thanks to the *unrelenting* Mason, and he sat down.

I wonder if a word of thanks isn’t in order—a word of thanks to God who still has hope for us and in us, who loves us enough to clamor for our attention, who stands at our door and knocks. Maybe today we’ll open the door to our persistent God, who indeed hears our prayers and who makes the sun to shine and the moon to beam, and who will *not* let us lose heart.

Notes

- 1 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor Books, 1999).
- 2 Tom Long, “Praying without Losing Heart” (Sermon, October 7, 2007).
- 3 Barbara Brown Taylor, “Bothering God” in *Home By Another Way* (Lanham, Maryland, Cowley Publications, 1999).
- 4 NRSV, Deuteronomy 10:17-18.
- 5 NRSV, Isaiah 1:17.
- 6 Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996).
- 7 Used a movie clip in *The Gathering*: Robert Duvall in the movie *The Apostle*.
- 8 Bob Dunham, “Whose Persistence?” (Sermon, October 21, 2007).