

All Who Humble Themselves

Luke 18:1-14

I must admit that the words of this sermon are based on Luke 18:1-8; however the title is based on verses 9-14. I was confused. However the text that I studied does answer some questions about prayer. Does God hear our prayers? Do our prayers matter or make a difference? Do we waste our energy and time when we pray? This parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge has some valuable lessons on the subject of prayer. In these eight verses, we find Christian teachings on prayer and trust, justice and deliverance, judgment and faith, persistence and resistance, the first and second coming of Christ, and the life of believers. It is so rich that it is difficult to focus. Is the focus, for example, on who God is and how God acts, or on the believers and our call to faithful life? Is the emphasis on the need of the devout piety in one's private prayer life, or on communal resistance against injustice?

Reformed theology, John Calvin in particular, always emphasized that we cannot separate who God is and what God does from who we are and what we are called to do. God's sovereignty over all areas of our life does not allow for a disconnection of private and public faith life. So let us first focus on *persistence*—not ours, but God's persistence. One way to summarize the biblical message, the good news of the Old and New Testament is God's persistent, unshakable, everlasting love for us, for all of God's creation. We deserve God's condemnation, but God is so persistently in love with us, God's love is so sovereign and unshakable, that we can trust in this God to bring about justice. We can be sure that God hears our prayers, our crying day and night, even though we may not see any results yet. God has not forgotten us; God will not delay long in helping. Of course, we grow impatient, losing heart and hope. Does the world we are living in come even close to the world Christians have been praying for since Jesus' first coming? As Fred Craddock puts it: "All we

know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking and waiting; trust sometimes fainting; sometimes growing angry."

It is here that our persistence and humility enters the picture. Because we know of and have experienced God's persistent love in Christ, we try every day anew to persist in praying "Thy kingdom come." Praying is and always has been hard work in the interim—between God's promise and its fulfillment, in the life of Israel and in the life of the church living between the first and the second coming of Christ—as is keeping hope in our hopeless world. Praying means hopeful trusting in God, not in ourselves.

Our limited or even nonexistent prayer life can have many reasons; often we find at the core that our faith has lost trust. But the widow kept coming to the judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. We keep praying, hoping against all odds, persistent, humble, determined, and relentless. Not because we are "good Christians" or because we possess such a great and strong faith, not even because it is "the chief part of the gratitude which God requires of us," but because the Spirit has given us the courage to do so, to pray without ceasing in a broken and fearful world. In a way, the widow in Jesus' parable represents not only the need to pray always, as Luke puts it, but also the Spirit's continuous work of encouraging us to pray, the Spirit's nagging persistence and unrelenting perseverance.

This hopeful, humble courage that we receive as a gift from the Holy Spirit leads not only to a meditative and introspective life of prayer, but to an active and "extrospective" life of prayer as well, one that includes *resistance* against all forms of injustice. Luise Schottroff underlines this thought emphatically in her interpretation of the parable of the stubborn widow: "Praying and crying to God against injustices describes the whole life of the believers: our efforts, our protests against injustice. It describes also our trust in God, for we know that God acts very differently than the unjust judge."

We can see why and how if we look at God as described in Jesus' parable. Twice God is described as the one who will grant justice, with other words: God's love is not only persistent, but also just. The central event of God's loving justice and just love in Christ's

cross and resurrection reveals not only God's resistance against individual sin, but also God's powerful resistance against the unjust powers that be, an act of resistance that has already changed our world, even though it might be hard for us to detect at times. As God's children, we are called to humbly join God's resistance, equipped with the special gift of the Holy Spirit: resisting and persisting prayer, of which the stubborn and enduringly hopeful widow is an inspiring example. **Margit Ernst-Habib**

Another view of the parable: a woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten politician who could not 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 whatever you want if you will just shut up!" This woman always gets a raw deal, because she has nothing—no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. This judge is only out for himself; no public servant, but he finally does something good in spite of himself. How many of us 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 natural disaster. The television and radio bring news of more war casualties, even though we continually pray for peace. Is this really the way it is supposed to be? Let's look again at the parable. What hope is Jesus offering? He insists that God is nothing like this unjust judge. If Jesus is pledging even speedier relief to our persistent pray-ers than the widow got from the unjust judge (v. 8a), we are not feeling relieved. If it is a speedy return of Jesus to earth so that justice is fulfilled (v. 8b), the credibility gap in our twenty-first-century church widens. We are weary or already-gave-up-on-it pray-ers and unexpectant wait-ers. Our experience does not match when God does not fix things for all who ask persistently, and when most of us are not exactly waiting on rooftops for Christ's return?

Jesus seems to anticipate our dilemma when he wonders aloud whether, when he comes again, 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" (v. 1). We are reminded, once again, that the life of faith is not only about telling God what is on our wish list but constantly lifting up every joy and concern, every fear and doubt, every lament and plea to the One who hears and answers. The answers may not come when we think they should. But, "A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone," we sing, echoing the psalmist. The God of Isaiah reminds us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (55:8). It is hard, however, to take the long view when we are praying our hearts out, bruising our hands with our continual pounding on heaven's door.

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.

This is the kind of prayer we pray whenever we humbly gather at the Lord's Table: "In union with your church in heaven and on earth, we pray, O God, that you will fulfill your eternal purpose in us and in all the world. Keep us faithful in your service until Christ comes in final victory, and we shall feast with all your saints in the joy of your eternal realm." Again, "May his coming in glory find us ever watchful in prayer, strong in truth and love, and faithful in the breaking of the bread. Then, at last, all peoples will be free, all divisions healed, and with your whole creation, we will sing your praise, through your Son, Jesus Christ."

We are faithful to Jesus' instruction too whenever we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Once again, Jesus makes it clear that faith is actively hoping, eagerly anticipating the coming reign of God, never ceasing in our prayers for others, for the world, even for ourselves.

Our ministry as church must impart hope to the suffering. It is necessary continually and actively to pray at all times, so when tragedies happen to us, there is already in place a strong

confidence in the unfailing providence of God. It is far more difficult to understand this sense of God's faithfulness when we are face to face with challenges or crises. However, when there is an active faith at work, faith that is lived as we strive toward the coming reign of God, then hope remains alive, and we can sing, even if voices falter, "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home." **Kimberly Bracken Long**

A preacher told that he had two good and loving parents. They did not give him everything he wanted. He asked for a horse, a dog, a two-wheel bicycle before he was old enough to ride it. One Christmas he had his heart set on a toy drum set he found in the Sears catalog. His requests were heard and turned down. In retrospect, he understood that he received, not always what he most wanted, but what he 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 requests, but to hear, with loving, parental patience, the persistent prayers of your heart. **John M. Buchanan**

The thread that may connect this parable to our sermon title is that we must humble ourselves to persist in prayer. We must know the power does not lie in us, but in our merciful God. Sisters and brother pray – pray always – know that God does hear your prayers.