

Pray Always

Luke 18:1-8

Just when we think we 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 laughed at this ridiculous tale. A woman pounded and pounded on the door of a rotten politician who could not care less about her plight, until finally he stuck his head out the window and shouted, "All right, already! Knock it off! I will give you whatever you want if you will just shut up!" They laughed because they knew the woman. She always got a raw deal, because she had nothing—no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. They knew the judge too, the one who was only out for himself. No public servant, that one, so they chuckled at the idea of one of their own, this powerless woman, annoying the guy everyone loved to hate until, finally, he did something good in spite of himself.

Good story! They laughed, and then they sighed, and they remembered that Jesus told them that this is what prayer is like. Jesus had their attention and hopefully he may even have our attention too. 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 like Hurricane Matthew. The radio, television, newspapers, or Internet brings news of more war casualties, even though we continually pray for peace. Is this really the way it is supposed to be?

Jesus insisted that God is nothing like this unjust judge. If he was pledging even speedier relief to our persistent pray-ers than the widow got from the unjust judge

(v. 8a), why are we not feeling relieved? If it was a speedy return of Jesus to earth so that justice is fulfilled (v. 8b), why do we feel the credibility gap in a twenty-first-century church widens. We often are weary or already-gave-up-on-it pray-ers and unexpectant wait-ers. As eye-catching and ear-catching as it may be, how can this parable land meaningfully 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 told 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. We are told this in scripture, sermon and song. "A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone," we sing, echoing the psalmist. In Isaiah God reminds us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (55:8). Even with these warnings it is hard for us to take the long view when we are praying our hearts out and bruising our hands with our continual pounding on heaven's door. **Kimberly Bracken Long**

In our scripture Jesus taught about prayer and trust, justice and deliverance, judgment and faith, persistence and resistance, the first and second coming of Christ, and the life of believers. Jesus told of God's persistence. The total sum of the biblical message, the good news of the Old and New Testament, is God's persistent, unshakable, everlasting love for us, and for all of God's creation. We know 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 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. Often we grow impatient, losing heart and hope. How could

we not? 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 the persistence of the faithful enters the picture. Because we know of and have experienced God's persistent love in Christ, we can try every day 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—it is as hard as keeping hope in our hopeless world. Praying means hopeful trusting in God, not in ourselves.

A poor or nonsexist prayer life of Christians may have many reasons; (we are busy, we are tired, others are already praying about the situation); but often we find at the core a faith that has lost trust. The widow kept coming to the judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined, and relentless. We keep praying, hoping against all odds, persistent, 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" (Question 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism), but because the Spirit has given us the courage to do so, to pray without ceasing in a broken and fearful world (A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 65-67). In a way, the widow in Jesus' parable represents not only the need to pray always, but also the Spirit's incessant work of encouraging us to pray, the Spirit's nagging persistence and unrelenting perseverance.

This hopeful courage that we receive as a gift from the Holy Spirit leads not only to a personal life of prayer, for ourselves and those we love and know, but to an active life of prayer 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: their efforts, their protests against injustice. It describes also their trust in God, for they know that God acts very differently than the unjust judge."

In Jesus' parable God's love is not only persistent, but also just. We know the central event of God's loving justice and just love in Christ's cross and resurrection that reveals not only God's resistance against our 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 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 our inspiring example. **Margit Ernst-Habib**

Jesus said, "God will not delay. God will help. God will grant justice." By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in assurance 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 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." Or, "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). Jesus made 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.

It is necessary continually and actively to pray in this way so that, when tragedies befall us, there is already in place a strong confidence in the unfailing providence of God. It is far more difficult to experience this sense of God's faithfulness when we are face to face with challenges or crises. When, however, we demonstrate an active faith, faith that is lived as we strive toward the coming reign of God, then hope remains alive, and we can sing, even if our 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**

Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us to be faithful in prayer – pray always!

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