

“Praying Always”

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 by continually coming.’ ”
And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.
And will not God grant justice
to God’s chosen ones who cry to God day and night?
Will God delay long in helping them?
I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them.
And yet, when the Son of Man comes,
will he find faith on earth?”

Praying Always

Luke 18:1-8

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I.

I will concede from the start that I had originally imagined my words today would constitute something of a “boutique” sermon. Not that it was intended to be high-end or fashionable but, rather, a bit esoteric and specialized having arisen from a specific, though not unique, set of circumstances. As it turns out, I could not have been more incorrect in this assumption as the concepts under scrutiny this morning are about as common, conventional, and routine as they come. Refreshingly so.

First the passage. Our text today comes from the 18th chapter of Luke, the parable of the Unjust Judge. Here we find a very courageous, boundlessly persistent, ever hopeful, and exceedingly stubborn *woman*. While such characteristics *could* apply to either men or women, it has been my experience that such attributes are much more common among women simply because they have had to be.

II.

Though certainly equally prevalent in other cultures and eras, the context of this specific instance is ancient Palestinian society where the position of a woman who had lost the support of the man to whom she was married left the widow socially help-less, economically vulnerable, and unable to exert any real influence on those in power so as to be able to direct her own affairs or the course of her life. Persistence, then, was her only recourse in her case against some unnamed opponent in regard to some undisclosed matter. She just keeping going back to the judge.

Let us be clear, though, she was not seeking punishment of her opponent but, rather, the settling of her rights as were due her. She wanted justice, not revenge. Finally, after a great deal of concerted effort she received the justice she rightly deserved. Less because of the virtuousness of her cause and more because she made herself a nuisance. So completely exasperated and worn out is he, that the judge finally vindicates her. Otherwise, she may have never stopped pestering him.

III.

A compelling story, Jesus uses this parable as the means to teach the listener about our need to pray always and not to lose heart. If an unjust and dishonest judge can be prevailed upon to do justice, how much more will an upright God listen to the persistent prayer of God's own children? And therein lies the rub, and it is a doozy. If you aren't yet feeling the chafe and the burn, give me a minute...you will.

First though, we need to take a step back and do a quick review of prayer. Prayers can be categorized by their *style* or their *purpose*. They may be public or private, said aloud or spoken internally, and stated or sung. Remember, in the Reformed Tradition singing is understood to be an act of prayer. Broadly speaking, Reformed theology classifies prayer by its *subject* matter, for which the acronym ACTS is helpful: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

IV.

Prayers of Adoration praise God for who God is and recognize God's attributes of omnipotence (all powerful), omniscience (all knowing), omnipresence (always/ever present) as well as being supremely good, true, wise, merciful, and loving. Prayers of Confession acknowledge one's sins and offer a movement toward our repentance (change) from them. Prayers of Thanksgiving express gratitude for specific blessings and actions from God. Prayers of Supplication/Petition, also known as Intercessory Prayers, ask God for things one needs; either for oneself or for others. Every Sunday when we gather worship we offer each of these four types of prayer, either in word or song.

To the ACTS acronym I would make one addition, Prayers of Lamentation (L). These are a crying out to God in times of pain, fear, or despair which arise not from resentment or self-pity, but a brutally honest admission of how things are or have come to be. When it gets *really* bad, the most for which we can hope is to not be so utterly alone in our misery and loss.

V.

Most of ACTS(L) is fairly straightforward and easily understood. The tricky part comes with Intercessory Prayer (aka Prayers of Supplication). In particular, those made on behalf of others.

Let us imagine that you are a parent and have just received a very dire medical diagnosis for your young child. What is the first thing you? Pray, of course. You may also become angry, sad, bitter, and, especially, incredibly worried. Mostly, though, you pray. Whether or not you are a person of faith, or a church goer. Regardless if you've ever done so before or not. Even if you think it somewhat silly or feel hypocritical for doing so. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, what you profess or, even, if you think there isn't anyone necessarily there to hear you, you pray. "*Please*, God, heal my child, let my child be ok." Then, you ask *everyone* you know, family, friends, and strangers alike to pray for your child. Who wouldn't? Who couldn't?!?

VI.

Now for the rub, the chafe, the burn. How much are we to pray? How often? How long in duration should our prayers be, and how often should we offer them? When it comes to prayer does the quality, eloquence, or earnestness of one's prayers become a factor, or is simply a matter of the quantity or sheer volume of prayers? Do the prayers of some carry more weight than the prayers of others? At what point does prayer change from a request for grace, to a work which endeavors to earn, achieve, or convince God to allow or give such grace? How much of the child's fate is dependent on the prayers offered on their behalf? How can it be that something which might allow a sense of peace about the world and our place in it, becomes a gauntlet of fear and worry we are made to run in the hope of securing the outcome we seek? How much of the child's suffering is due to the insufficiency or ineffectiveness of our prayer? Is it our fault to begin with that the child became sick in the first place because we had not been praying all along?

VII.

While it might be convenient to dismiss these questions as hypotheticals or rare, worst-case only scenarios, I can assure you 33 years of ministry have shown them to be utterly real and decidedly common. I have been asked some variation of each of these questions too many times to recount, usually in a moment when whatever answer I may offer will be accompanied by *profound* implications. In such a context, my responses are necessarily pastoral in nature (mercifully for me) rather than doctrinal or dogmatic.

While I might be persuaded to argue that such questions *always* require a pastoral response, today I am going to play along solely because this morning's text from Luke chapter 18 gives us the means to muster an answer in the abstract. Remember, we find our truth not through human wisdom or authority, but as revealed to us by *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture Alone). Nevertheless, we are going to be *extremely* careful in our inquiry.

VIII.

Here in the parable of the Unjust Judge it seems quite clear that Jesus is advocating for prayer which is persistent and unrelenting, even to the point of nagging God just as the widow nagged the judge. This would *seem* to suggest that the efficacy or effectiveness of our prayers *are* a function of our efforts in offering them. One way to understand this parable is to view it as an invitation for us to demand God's attention, overcome or reverse divine momentum and, if necessary, to help either make-up God's mind or to change it altogether (for which there is ample scriptural precedence).

Returning, then, to our hypothetical sick child it would *seem* that the more prayer the better; with fervor, sheer determination, utter doggedness the order of each day. However, there are important distinctions which may prevent us from extrapolating too much or drawing the conclusions for which we might find ourselves hoping.

IX.

In the parable of the Unjust Judge the widow isn't seeking vengeance but justice. In our sick child analogy, we aren't seeking justice, but favor. I would argue this is an enormous distinction. The simple truth of human existence is this: we are not owed anything, and we are deserving of even less. Not because we are bad (or inherently sinful) or that we are receiving our just desserts (though we very well may be). Instead, sometimes that is just the way the cookie crumbles whether we like it or not. To think we can alter the world such as to avoid the crumbling of a cookie which is exceedingly dear to us, or that we can persuade God to do so on our behalf, is a profound innocence at best or an outrageous idolatry at worst. Of course, this is not the kind of thing I spout off in the ER or at the death bed. Mostly because we all know this already, at least at some level. It is not something which needs to be said, and certainly not in moments such as *those*.

X.

However, in moments such as *these* when we gather together to worship, take seriously the study of scripture, and share our lives with each other we need to be forthright with ourselves. An innate part of the human experience is to always seek control of one's own life or, failing this, to achieve some semblance of understanding about it. Noble endeavors to be sure, but a higher calling is to simply bear each other up; and, in doing so, our own selves as well.

This is not to say I do not believe in the miracles that prayer might bring, it is just that I do not believe miracles are reliant upon the quality or quantity of my prayers. They wouldn't be very miraculous miracles if they were and, to continue that thought to its logical conclusion, not much need for the cross either. God's grace cannot be earned or petitioned for, it can only be received by God as a gift regardless of however faint & feeble our prayers, or how sinful we may feel or find ourselves. Which is what makes the Good news so good.

XI.

Yet, having said all of this, we still must reconcile Jesus's words in the first verse of Luke chapter 18: "*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.*" Dusting off my Greek, a less eloquent but more accurate translation would be: "*He was speaking then a parable to them about the [way] it behooves always to pray them and to not lose heart.*" Do we *need* to pray always? I would argue no. However, it certainly does *behoove* us always to pray.

I would make the claim that prayer is less an act and an obligation and more an attitude and an orientation which admits the difference between creature and Creator, and abides our own small place in the creation such that we might be open to receive the grace God might impart to us. Moreover, I do not believe our prayers are a sign that we have not lost heart but, rather, the *means* by which we keep our heart regardless of the effect and outcome of those prayers.

XII.

Before we end this deep(ish) dive into the notion of prayer, I would offer a final admonition about Intercessory Prayer. All the while we wait upon

answers to the prayers we offer for the way we wish our world to go, let us remember that there is an excellent chance that *we* are the answer to the Intercessory prayers of others such that *they* might not lose heart. It is *we* who are the instruments of God's grace in this world. This is what it means to be the Church, the body of Christ, and to live as people of faith.

Over these years I have seen, time and again, how this church and all of you have touched the lives of others in real and meaningful ways. Those who live down the street, across this county, and in all the world. This much I know for certain, there would be far fewer prayers being answered were it not for this congregation. "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*" Yes, if the Son of Man looks here to the people of the Park. Amen.