

Persevering in Prayer

Revelation 8:1-5 Luke 18:1-8

Our topic this morning: persevering in prayer. As Rom.12:12 says, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. That's a good word for God's people these days—have hope, and be joyful in our hope... Be patient in affliction (challenges, difficulties)... Be faithful in prayer... These are good reminders, and this morning's focus is on the third part, being faithful, or persevering, in prayer. Before I go any further...

In my preaching experience over the years I have come to know that when I say I'm going to be talking about prayer, many people tune out, or begin to make that shopping list, or decide what I'm going to have for lunch. Because, prayer doesn't sound like an exciting topic. Or, there are obstacles to overcome, so prayer feels like a lot of effort for what seems to be little benefit. The thinking being, I know I'm supposed to pray, the Bible tells me to pray (or the pastor does) and I try to pray, but nothing happens, and I'm just not feeling it. Or my mind wanders; because it's hard to concentrate. Or, I have been disappointed with God not coming through in the past, so I'm hesitant to pray any more.

Or, I just don't know what to say. This might be one of the most frequently expressed obstacles to prayer that I hear. I'd like to pray more, but I don't have words.

There are any number of obstacles to consistent, persevering prayer, but these are a few that I've heard over the years. And, that I have sometimes experienced. And our passages today are going to encourage us to get past those hindrances, or mental blocks, to see prayer—that is, to see God—as something (someone) worth spending time and effort in persevering with.

As I dive into this topic of persevering in prayer, and before I read our parable for this morning, I want us to let the words and images from the book of Revelation sink in, which Stephen read for us. About our prayers, rising like incense before God.

This is brilliant spectacle. Can you visualize this? Can you smell this? And, more importantly, did you hear that the prayers of the saints rise up before God with incense? David claims this truth in one of his prayers, in Psalm 141:1-2: "I call upon you, O Lord; give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you."

People have mixed feelings about and experiences of incense, but in the middle east incense is an experience of daily life, the spicy aromas filling the air, reminding people in an experiential way of peace and calm and of the abundance of life. And, for God's people, of prayers rising up to the heavens.

So, friends, know this: God hears and receives your prayers. You are one of the saints whose prayers are received by God. It says "all the saints" not "some" saints or "professional" saints—the prayers of *all* the saints—that includes you!—are heard and received. And God doesn't just hear our prayers, God *experiences* your prayers! Just like you and I would experience incense, through sight and smell. Whether you like that smell or not, know that in the eastern mindset and experience it's a beautiful thing. God experiences your prayers; and that experience is a beautiful thing to God.

This is all to say, prayer matters. And therefore we shouldn't give up on it or grow weary in praying. God hears, God responds. And, I am convinced that we need to persevere in prayer these days, for our personal peace of mind and heart, and because our world needs us to persevere in prayer.

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 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. Thanks be to God!

What I appreciate about this teaching on prayer, and all of Jesus' teaching on prayer is that it is so simple and straightforward. To use the worn-out phrase, this isn't rocket science. Jesus is encouraging simple, persistent prayer. And this morning we are focusing on the persistence aspect of it. Prayer is meant to be an ongoing, everyday, simple-but-persistent conversation with the living God. And our parable illustrates this.

Jesus' stories, though not based 100% of the time on actual events, *are* based on common everyday things that people actually did, and therefore could relate to and understand—like seeds and soil, yeast and bread, parents and children, people conducting business and so forth. These are ordinary everyday things that people can relate to. Yet many of Jesus' stories contain hyperbolic,

over the top elements, which are meant to be attention-grabbers. Some of them are humorous, some of them startling, some of them are head-scratchers.

Now, our parable for this morning sounds like one of those over-the-top stories: an unscrupulous judge without a conscience and an obstinate widow who pesters him every day, probably for weeks. But it may surprise us to learn that this parable is very likely based on real events and is not much of an exaggeration at all. This is something that happened at least once in a while, and was not startling or head scratching or humorous, but an illustration that people would've reacted to by saying, "Oh ya, I've seen that happen before."

Here is a retelling of a story from an Iraqi man, from about 35 years ago. And it is told by Professor Kenneth Bailey (who I quoted a few weeks ago), a middle east scholar (Presbyterian) who taught at the university in Beirut, Lebanon, and often went about talking with locals in the villages and asking them what they thought of Jesus' parables and teachings. He would read one of the parables, for example, and say, "Can you imagine someone talking and teaching like this? Do the details and elements of the stories ring true to you?" And their eyes would light up, and then out would come the explanations and anecdotes.

Kenneth Bailey recounts the following story, as told to him by a local, when Bailey asked about this parable of the widow and the hard-hearted judge. Use your imagination to picture this scene:

“It was in the ancient city of Nisibis, Mesopotamia. Immediately upon entering the gate of the city, on one side stood the prison, with its barred windows, through which the prisoners thrust their arms and begged for alms. Opposite was a large open hall, the court of justice of the place. On a slightly raised dais (platform) at the further end sat the Kadi, or judge, half buried in cushions. Round him squatted various secretaries and other notables. The populace crowded into the rest of the hall, a dozen voices clamoring at once, each claiming that his cause should be the first heard. The more prudent litigants joined not in the fray, but held whispered communications with the secretaries, passing bribes, euphemistically called fees, into the hand of one or another. When the greed of the underlings was satisfied, one of them would whisper to the Kadi, who would promptly call such and such a case. It seemed to be ordinarily taken for granted that the judgment would go for the litigant who had bribed the highest.

But meantime a poor woman on the skirts of the crowd perpetually interrupted the proceedings with loud cries for justice. She was sternly bidden to be silent, and reproachfully told that she came there every day. “And so I will,” she cried out, “till the Kadi hears me.” At length, at the end of a suit, the judge impatiently demanded, “What does that woman want!?!?” Her story was told: her only son had been taken for a soldier, and she was alone, and could not till her piece of ground; yet the tax-gatherer had forced her to pay taxes, from which as a lone widow she could be exempt under the law. The judge asked a few questions, and said, “Let her be exempt.” Thus her perseverance was rewarded. Had she had money to bribe a clerk, she might have been excused long before.”

Isn't that fascinating? That happened just a few decades ago. Now, I know it's hard for us to image that a judge or a politician could be bought off with a bribe or money under the table... but there you have it. So Jesus' parable rings true.

Well, let's talk about the parable. There is a simple lesson in here, but Jesus gets at the lesson a bit differently than he usually does in his parables.

Most parables are comparisons, which are introduced with the phrase: *the kingdom of God is like...* someone working yeast into dough; it's *like* a small seed growing into a large tree; it's *like* a landowner who hires workers to work in his vineyard, and so forth. These are comparisons.

Some parables, though, are meant to be contrasts. Like the one earlier in Luke's gospel about the guy who has unexpected out of town visitors and has no pastries and coffee for the morning to serve his guests, and so he goes to his friend's house at midnight and knocks on his door, and his friend yells from the bedroom and says, "Go away! I've gone to bed already." But because of his persistence and relentless knocking, his friend gets up and gives him what he needs for his guests.

That's a contrast. Jesus is *not* saying that God is like a sleepy friend who tells you to go away when you ask him for something you need but then *grudgingly* gives it to you when you've been enough of a pain in the neck. What Jesus *is* saying, by way of contrast, is: if your friend would do this for you, grumpy as they may be at midnight, how much more will your *not-grumpy* Father God give you what you need when you ask, seek and knock.

And that's what this parable of the widow and the unjust judge is; it's a contrast. We know this because Jesus does not start the parable by saying, "The Kingdom of God is like..." He just jumps in with, "In a certain city there was a judge..." So the point of the contrast is, if a corrupt and conscienceless judge could be moved by the persistence of someone he was *indifferent* to and annoyed by, how much more is God moved with compassion by the prayers of people he *loves*. God *isn't* like this judge, so all the more reason we should pray and not lose heart. The call is to persevere.

Jesus is focusing on one main point: he is encouraging a kind of holy boldness, a knocking on the door, an insistent asking, a search that refuses to give up, because *God is good*. Not because God is the cosmic Archie Bunker. But because God receives and experiences our prayers, as pleasing offerings. That,

Jesus says, is what our prayer needs to be like—in light of the love and goodness of who God the Father is and how he responds to his children (us!). And because God is not grumpy, or dishonest and uncaring like this judge, this ought to help us relax, and feel relieved. We can be bold and persistent, but we don't have to be uptight about it, or afraid. We can be peaceful and confident in our persistence and boldness. It's like the apostle Paul's beloved admonition in his letter to the Philippians (4:8-f): "Be anxious for nothing... but pray about everything... and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds..." He is saying: be persistent and bold in prayer, and in a peaceful way. Because... God is good! And God hears.

With this parable, perhaps Jesus is telling us, you're not bold *enough* in prayer. You're too timid—your barriers to prayer and your understanding of God as a grump or as uncaring are getting in the way. Or maybe your understanding of yourself as unworthy is getting in the way. Go straight into the headquarters of the universe and pound on the door; let your needs be known. This is God the Father's invitation to us: be persistent and persevering in prayer, with your needs, or the needs of others. We can plead for justice on behalf of others too. Be like this widow: She is us. We are her. She represents everywoman and everyman who has a need.

And let me reiterate, one of the things I love about the Biblical language of prayer is that it's so non-religious, so non-pious. Jesus teaches us to pray by saying ask, seek, knock. Give us today our daily bread. Cry out for justice. This is not religious language. It's everyday language; it's street language. Jesus doesn't teach us to pray in high and lofty terms, using a thesaurus. He teaches us to pray simply. And he teaches us to be persistent like this woman and say, "Hey God, it's me! I have a need here!" and not give up.

So the call to pray, and pray with perseverance, is not a rule-keeping expectation: "Thou shalt pray more." My approach to it is: why wouldn't we **want** to pray more?? If this is how gracious God is, and if this is the gracious invitation to us, why wouldn't we want to consistently approach God with confidence?

Prayer is not a duty but a lifeline. There is no formula, only relationship. It isn't something to be endured; it's a way of receiving the good gifts our heavenly Father wants to give us. Prayer is a need, and an encouragement. After all, look at the reason that is given about why Jesus told this parable: he told them this parable so they should pray *always and not lose heart*. God wants us to pray because he doesn't want us to lose heart; to become discouraged or despairing.

God wants us to know that he is our advocate, that he wants us to stay encouraged. God will come through, maybe with a specific answer, maybe not, or not what we expect; but our Father always comes through with love and peace and joy.

Which begs the question: is there anything that you are tempted to lose heart about right now? In your life? In the world? Then (the important second question), what would it look like to be like this widow, in praying about it, with perseverance and persistence?

Here is a prayer exercise to try this week. In a quiet moment of prayer, picture yourself in this parable, or in the story that the Iraqi man told to Kenneth Bailey. You are entering the gate of the city (where the seat of justice, the court always was). You are that widow, who is crying out for justice, or for some need you have. Maybe you are petitioning the judge on behalf of someone else who has no voice, and you are their voice. Can you picture yourself there? What are you saying? What are you crying out for?

Important: how do you picture the judge you are crying out to? Is this someone who demands to bargain with you? Tells you to go away because they think you are annoying? Or, is this someone who is eager to hear you? Who

looks you in the eyes and sees you, and asks you to speak so you can be heard?

Who is not in a hurry but takes time to listen; and who comforts you, perhaps

responds to you in some way? Then, take a moment to listen: what is this judge

saying to you?