

Persevering: in Prayer

Heb.12:1-2 **Luke 18:1-8**

I use a lot of sticky notes to remind myself of things and make lists. The older I get the more sticky notes I seem to use! I sometimes use them to remember Bible verses that are helpful to me, whether it's a reminder of a promise, or a kick in the pants I need. Place them in a location where I see them.

If you use sticky notes (or whatever) here is your sticky note verse for the morning. It speaks to our theme of perseverance, it piggybacks on Heidi's sermon last week, and it leads into our topic for this morning. It's Romans 12:12: Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (repeat). Heidi spoke on being *joyful in hope*. We are called to be *patient* (literally "longsuffering") in affliction, *faithful* in prayer. Longsuffering and faithful both sound like perseverance to me.

Our topic this morning: persevering in prayer. As Rom.12:12 says, be faithful 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 hit the snooze button and might consider this as nap time. Or, I have other lists to make on my sticky notes.

Because, prayer not an exciting topic. Or, there are obstacles to overcome, so prayer feels like a lot of work for 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; it's hard to concentrate. Or, I am disappointed with God not coming through. Or, I don't know what to say. This might be one of the most frequently expressed obstacles to prayer. I'd like to pray more, but I don't have words. I'm intimidated by formulas or formalities. Sort of like appearing before the queen of England. There are protocols and formalities, and you don't speak until spoken to first and all that. And when it's time to speak, 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 used as an excuse not to pray regularly. And our passages today are going to encourage us to get past those hindrances, or excuses, or mental blocks, to see prayer—that is, to see God—as something (someone) worth spending time and effort in persevering with.

Because a question sometimes arises: What good is prayer? And if we say “What good is prayer?” what we're really saying is, “What good is God?” Which,

to be honest, is a fair question. God doesn't seem to come through sometimes; or maybe a lot of the time. Bad things still happen; sickness isn't healed; horrible people continue to be horrible and do horrible things. And, on a personal note, it confounds me and sometimes confuses me that people who call themselves Christians are sometimes those horrible people who say and do horrible things, and I wonder, "What the heck, God? Why do you let these people represent you?" But that's my baggage and I'll work that out with God in time. It's one of my conundrums of faith. And it actually keeps me going back to God in prayer! I have more listening to do.

As I dive into this topic of persevering in prayer, I want us to hear this word from the book of Revelation (maybe instead of a sermon series I'll just keep sneaking passages from Revelation into my weekly sermons):

Rev. 8:3: "Another angel with a golden censer (a ball that is filled with incense, on a rope or chain; this is where the Roman Catholic church got this idea and practice, where a priest swings the censer so the smoke rises as a symbol of our prayers) came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the

throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.”

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? Same as one of David’s 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, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.” Or morning.

Maybe you hate the smell of incense. I like it, but even if you don’t, in the middle east incense was 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” or “professional” saints—the prayers of *all* the saints, that’s you too, are heard and received. And God doesn’t just hear our prayers, God *experiences* your prayers! Just like you and I would experience, through sight and smell, incense. 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 it's a beautiful thing to God.

This is all to say, prayer matters. And 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 as we head into this fall and winter, for our personal peace of mind and heart. And because our world needs us to persevere in prayer.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (our theme text for the series; think of this in light of the call to be faithful in prayer, to persevere in prayer)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely (think of this in terms of prayer, let us lay aside the barriers and obstacles to prayer), and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

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 (or all of Jesus' teaching, generally) 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 isn't something we try once and if it doesn't work (whatever that means) we give up. Prayer is meant to be an ongoing, everyday, simple-but-persistent conversation with the living and loving God. And our parable illustrates this.

Jesus' stories, though not based 100% 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. Many of them are humorous, some of them startling, some of them head-scratchers.

For example, the kingdom of heaven is like a woman mixing yeast in three measures of flour... that's a couple bushels, which would've made 60 loaves of bread at once! That's meant to be funny, and the people who heard it would've giggled because it's a ridiculously large amount. No one kneads that much flour at once. But it got their attention, and emphasized how powerful the 'yeast' of God's kingdom is, and how big God's kingdom grows.

Now, our parable for this morning sounds like one of those ridiculous 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 over-the-top 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 30 years ago. And it is retold by Professor Kenneth Bailey, a middle east scholar (Presbyterian) who taught 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.

Well in one of his books 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 (that never happens today, right? 😊) 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 the 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 treasure hidden in a field, 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 relaxed and peaceful in our persistence and boldness. "Be anxious for nothing... but pray about everything... and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds..." (Phil.4). Paul is saying: be persistent and bold in prayer, but in a peaceful, non-anxious way. Because... God is good!

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 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 like children, or even as children. To say, "Abba" father. This is a word that small children used in a family setting. He teaches us to be persistent like this woman and say, "Hey God, listen up! I have a need here!" and not give up.

So the call to pray, and pray often, and 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 the Father 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 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, and therefore to thrive and not just survive. 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? I'd encourage that to be our reflection this week. Where are you tempted to lose heart? Then (the important second question), what would it look like to be like this widow, or like a child, in praying about it, with perseverance and persistence?

Prayer exercise: 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, that person, 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? Is this someone

who demands to bargain with you? Tells you to go away? Accepts bribes? Or, is this someone who is eager to hear you? Who silences the other voices so yours can be heard? Who takes time to listen, really listen; and who comforts you, perhaps responds to you in some way? What is this judge saying to you?