

Unnamed Women of the Bible: Persistence in Prayer

Matthew 7:7-11

Luke 18:1-8

Our series this winter... the women of the Bible. Today we are learning from an unnamed widow from one of Jesus' *parables*. I wanted to include at least one of the women from Jesus' parables as part of this series. As mentioned a few weeks ago, Jesus often made a woman the central character in his parables, sometimes playing the *God-character* in the story, which is remarkable—and scandalous for that time! This morning, the woman in the story is not the God-character but someone who is a model of faith and perseverance. Because the topic of the parable is prayer—*persistence* in prayer. This morning, the woman we will meet is meant to be an every-woman, every-man character, to encourage us to persist/persevere in prayer.

Before I read our parable from Luke, I want to introduce the topic from this perspective: what are our barriers to prayer? What are our obstacles to prayer? The Bible talks a lot about prayer; Jesus taught on it frequently (and he himself prayed frequently); the apostle Paul admonishes people to pray without ceasing. I'm sure that all of us struggle with that, so, what are the obstacles, or the barriers? In my experience over the years, a few of the main ones are these:

One, I don't have time. I have too many things going on. Which often means—let's be honest—I don't *make* time for prayer. Other things have become more important, or I let other things fill up my schedule or distract me. Related to that...

Second, is that prayer is boring and unproductive. Nothing happens. I *would* make more time for prayer if it were more exciting, or if something happened. But God isn't here, physically, to see, and interact with. I don't hear anything, my mind wanders, I fall asleep, etc. It's boring. Or unproductive.

Third obstacle, 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. Not to mention that I'm intimidated by not knowing what to say, or, I'm intimidated by God. Sort of like appearing before the queen or king 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.

Fourth, prayer doesn't work (for me at least; maybe it does for others, but not for me). I've tried it, and I don't get any answers or resolution to what I am praying for.

And related to that is the obstacle in the mind, a faith obstacle, a type of unbelief that says that God doesn't really answer prayer anyway, or God isn't really listening to people, personally. God expects us to be nice to others, but God isn't actively involved in human affairs. Besides (some people think) God is a grumpy curmudgeon and is not to be bothered; so, best to just leave God alone and get on with your business.

Finally, an obstacle I've heard expressed—not as often but it certainly exists for some people, is... I don't pray because I know that God *does* answer prayer, and therefore I'm afraid of what God might do in response to my prayer. That may seem like a funny obstacle to prayer, but it's real. I've heard people voice it. One person I spoke with about this said: "I want to ask God to show me what he wants me to do, but I just know God is going to answer my prayer by asking me to do something I don't want to do—like loving someone I don't even like, or sending me to some other country to be a missionary. I don't want to do that. I don't want to open up to God and lose control." There's the truth coming out! I don't want to open myself to God and lose control. Because... God might actually speak.

And the truth is, letting God be God in our lives *is* risky. But God is love, and God would never ask us to do something that would make us miserable. Out of control, ya, that's likely. Miserable, no. We pray "your kingdom come, your will be done..." which is a prayer of letting go of control, of consent to God's will; but we have faith that God's will is good, and not misery. And, God means to bless his children with good gifts, even as we surrender to his will.

There are other barriers and obstacles to prayer, and you have probably thought of them just in the last minute or two, but whatever your obstacle may be (we all have them, pastors included), the way to overcome them is to persevere through simple, persistent prayer. Simple, persistent prayer. 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, simple but persistent conversation with the living and loving God.

With that in mind, let's turn to our text from Luke. I'm reading from the Message translation because I think it captures the nuances of the story, and Jesus' teaching, better.

18 ¹⁻³ Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. (lit: "and not lose heart"). He said, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared

nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!'

⁴⁻⁵ "He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"

⁶⁻⁸ Then the Master said, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"

This is the word of the Lord.

Jesus' parables are stories, and though they are not based 100% on actual events, they *are* based on common, everyday things that people did and therefore could relate to and understand—like seeds and soil, yeast and bread, parents and children, people conducting business, and so forth. Yet, even though they are about common, everyday things and activities, many of these 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 head-scratchers.

For example, “The kingdom of heaven (Jesus says) is like a woman mixing yeast into three measures of flour...” In that day, three measures equaled a couple buckets full of flour, which would’ve made 60 loaves of bread! That’s 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.

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. 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. Something that occasionally happened, and was not startling or head scratching or humorous, but an illustration that people would’ve reacted to by saying, “I’ve seen that happen before.”

Here is a retelling of a story from an Iraqi man, from about 40 years ago. And it is retold by Professor Kenneth Bailey, an American middle east scholar 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 he recounts the following story, as told to him by a local, when Kenneth Bailey asked about this parable of the widow and the conscienceless 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 persistence was rewarded. Had she had money to bribe a clerk, she might have been excused long before.”

Isn't that interesting? That happened just a few decades ago. 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 the parables. Because...

Most parables are comparisons: *the kingdom of God is like...* a woman 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 about the guy who has unexpected out of town visitors who come to stay with him, and he has run out of 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 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 (God *isn't* like that, telling people to go away). And, btw, it is also based on something that actually happened frequently in their culture.

When people heard it, they would react by saying “I’ve done that before; I’ve gone to a neighbor’s house to get food and supplies I need when guests arrive unexpectedly.” They also could’ve reacted by saying, “I’ve been the grouchy person who told someone to go away because I was in bed, but they kept pestering me.”

A story like that is meant to be a contrast, in terms of the God character. 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. 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 town 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, how much more is God moved 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. That’s why I like the

Message translation of this; it gets at the contrast better (“Did you hear what the corrupt judge is saying... what makes you think that God won’t step in...”)

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 grumpy, or uncaring. That, Jesus says, is what our prayer can be like—in light of who God our 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 (the apostle Paul says in Phil.4) but pray about everything... and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds...” Paul is saying: be persistent 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. Go straight into the headquarters of the universe and pound on the door. This is God the Father’s invitation to us: be persistent and persevering in prayer, with your needs. Like

this widow. She is us. We are her. She represents everywoman and everyman who has a need.

She also represents child-likeness, with regard to prayer—as Jesus illustrated in the reading from Matt 7 (“if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much *more* will your Father give good gifts to his children”). Part of that child-likeness is simple asking—yet sometimes relentless and persistent asking, right? The tug on the pant leg, the following you around the house, the consistent asking for something. In a way only kids can do!

And this is where I come back to the idea of *simple* prayer. Simple prayer is a child asking a parent for something to eat. Simple prayer is saying, “Give us this day our daily bread” as Jesus taught. Simple, ordinary, everyday things. In the same way a small child can’t draw a bad picture (“the dog is too big in relation to the house; and the sun isn’t *that* big and bright...” We don’t say that. What do we do? We put that picture on the refrigerator and we admire it!); in the same way a small child can’t draw a bad picture, so a child of God can’t offer a bad prayer, prayed in earnestness and simplicity. And we are God’s children, whom he loves. God smiles upon us when we approach him with our needs.

Along those lines, one of the things I love about the Biblical language of prayer is that it's so non-religious, so non-pious. Ask, seek, knock. Give us today our daily bread. This is not religious language. It's everyday language; it's common household 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. That's a word that small children used in a family setting.

Now, children are full of wants, and they don't always know what they really need, but eventually they get it. And we parents often do get it right in terms of what they need, and we're pleased to give them what they truly need (which is sometimes simply our attention and affection). And Jesus is saying, that's what it's like when we come to our heavenly Parent. *We* don't always know what we need, but our heavenly Parent always does. God gets it right. And eventually we get it right in our asking. So we are invited to come, and keep coming, and keep coming. God is waiting to give good gifts.

So the call to pray, and pray often, and with perseverance, is not a legalistic 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, 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 is a way of receiving the good gifts our heavenly Parent wants to give us (as is promised in the Matt. 7 teaching).

Prayer is a need, and an encouragement, not a duty, or something to endure. 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.

Which suggests the question: is there anything that we are tempted to lose heart about right now? In our personal life? In the world? I'd encourage us to have that be our reflection this week. Where are you tempted to lose heart? Then (the important second question), what would it look like for you to be like this widow, or like a child, in praying about it, with perseverance and persistence?

Great is Thy Faithfulness