

When Stubbornness is Saintliness

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Maplewood PC**

**Luke 18:1-8
Psalm 5**

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Introduction to Luke 18:1-8

There's not much question as to the meaning of the parable we're about to hear today from Luke's Gospel – the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. There's not much question because Jesus tells us why the parable is important before he tells it - and then offers his own interpretation after he finishes telling it. It's a story about being persistent in prayer and not getting discouraged and losing heart when what we pray for doesn't materialize.

Sermon

When our sons, Dan and Andrew were young, they always wanted to play with me...and there was nothing I loved to do more. In fact, Ann and I worked part time intentionally so we could raise both boys with minimal childcare and maximum parent care. It gave me an opportunity to coach their soccer and baseball teams. It also gave me a chance to respond more often when they tugged at my arm and asked: "Dad, can we go to the playground? Or "can we go on a bike ride?"

But their tugs didn't always come at good times. I was often busy with a church related matter and didn't have the time. That didn't stop them from tugging and asking: Dad, can't we go do this now? As I look back, I'm so glad they didn't give up on me when I had other things on my agenda and wasn't giving them what they were asking for and needing - my time and attention and love.

I know my two sons are not the only children who tug at an arm or pull at a leg to get their parent's attention.

In one case, a boy in Target was shopping with his mom, walking alongside his mother's shopping cart clutching a bat. As a colleague tells it, he was trying to get his mom to let him put the bat in the cart. And she said, "No, we are not shopping for you today." The young boy went on to explain how special the bat was and why he needed it – to practice at home for his little league team and get better at batting. "Please. Please. Please mom," he pleaded. "I'll do chores to pay for it!" His mom's response was still said no. But she was softening...softening enough to finally say, "Call your Dad. See what he thinks." So he called his dad and began reasoning with him: "Dad, listen it's on sale at a great price. I'll work to pay it off. Really! Won't you let me have it? Please dad!" If I were there, I'd be tempted to just offer the mom to buy her son the bat. As it turned out, a few minutes later the mother and son were at the check-out stand...and the bat was in the cart.¹

Ever have a child – or grandchild like that?

¹ From Rev. Dr. Judy Kincaid's sermon "Is This How I'm Supposed to Pray?" October 20, 2019.

It seems to me that God has put into every child an instinctive quality of being persistent – never giving up - until they get their parent's attention and have in their hands what they're asking for.

Jesus told this parable of a persistent, even pestering widow to encourage us not to ever quit asking God for what we genuinely need – his love, his justice, his will to set things right in this world. It's told so we won't lose heart when all our tugging at God's arm through prayer doesn't seem to be getting God's attention.

Jesus lifts up a widow in this parable as a model for prayer, a woman who is about as powerless as a child, and yet she's a formidable individual because she is fearless and ferocious, tireless and tenacious. She pleads. She pesters. She pounds on the door of the judge until she gets the answer she's seeking, the justice she's needing.

Reminds me of one of my favorite stories of Mother Teresa who came one day to the office of a distinguished attorney, Edward Williams. She was requesting money from his foundation for a hospital she was building. It would serve people living with AIDS. The attorney had not been too favorable of supporting anything having to do with AIDS and said as much to the foundation board. But the attorney and members of the foundation board decided that – since this was Mother Teresa coming to see them – they'd at least listen politely to her appeal before graciously declining to help her.

So Mother Teresa came into the office and explained to members of the foundation how this hospital in Calcutta would be a great benefit to many children as well as adults. They heard her out, but when she asked for their financial support, they politely said "No."

So Mother Teresa folded her hands and bowed her head and said, "Let's pray, then." A few shrugged their shoulders as they prayed with her. After saying "amen," she began again explaining what a great benefit their foundation could be to so many suffering from AIDS, and asked once more for their support. And again they, politely but firmly, said "no."

But once again, Mother Teresa - the saint of stubbornness - invited them to pray and, after the prayer, started in again on what a difference they could make in the lives of thousands by their contribution to this hospital. This time, the attorney, flustered by the repeated requests and maybe feeling a bit badgered and beleaguered said: "All right! All right! I'll get the checkbook."

I love this story. Mother Teresa would've not lost heart. She refused to give up. She wouldn't quit making her plea until she knew she'd been heard and the critical resources were provided to help those in need.

Jesus shares this parable for the sake of those who've prayed and prayed and prayed, making their requests known over and over, and yet feel as if their prayers are falling on deaf ears. Jesus had taught them to pray for God's kingdom to come...but it hadn't come. Generations had passed and many had kept praying, "Come Lord Jesus, Come" but no kingdom had arrived...no justice, no peace, no reign of God as was promised. It wasn't that they hadn't prayed. They had! And with no result. And that was exactly the problem.

So Luke reminds his readers several generations after Jesus, about this story Jesus shared about a persistent widow. It was to be a reminder to them – as it's a

reminder for all of us who have felt “our prayers are sometimes like boomerangs the words go out from us but come back empty – that we’re to keep at it.

I think of all the times people have come to me, wondering what they’re doing wrong, wondering what they need to do differently in their prayers. “Are my words wrong,” they ask. “Is my heart wrong? Are my motives wrong? Why does it seem that these prayers of mine are like a letter I’ve sent to God that comes back to me with the words scribbled words on the envelope: “Return to sender. Address unknown. No such number.”

For those feeling like they’re praying into a black hole and wondering where justice is, Jesus gives us this parable. And in it is this surprising permission given to the weak and the powerless and the needy - and to all of us who may have a grievance with God ignoring our pleas - to get good and angry at God, to offer prayers of frustration that defy the conventions of niceness and politeness. Ring the doorbell, beat the door down, go over the wall, make a nuisance of yourself, give God a black and blue eye with your prayers – whatever it takes to get God’s attention, whatever it takes to get justice.

I know a person for whom this parable is not just some story or abstract lesson on prayer, but an existential reality. A dear friend, Daoud Nassar has been pounding on the door of justice for over 30 years to get his family’s land re-registered in Bethlehem. He has the title that goes back to the Ottoman Empire over 100 years ago. As a Palestinian Christian farmer, his land, like so many Palestinians before him, is on the verge of being stolen from him and yet he has been going to court hearings for over 30 years and getting nothing but delays – over 30 years and delay after delay after delay. In the past two years, he’s had ten court hearings in Israeli courts and every single one has been met with a delay in any decision being made to honor the family’s title to the land and re-register it to them. It’s death by a thousand cuts. There is no justice. There is no law. There is no accountability. Yet, like that widow, Daoud persists as a stubborn saint who won’t give up and keeps returning to the Israeli courts, knocking on the door of justice to see if anyone is home.

And elderly black minister, who knew something about beating a path to God through prayer, read this parable and gave a one sentence interpretation: “Until you’ve stood for years knocking at a locked door with bloody knuckles, you don’t really know how to pray.”²

I’ve been with you for 24 years as your pastor and can be frank with you - The longer I live, the more frustrated I am with the lack of justice and the delay of things being set right. I’m thinking, for example, of the lack of full voting rights, the removal of laws that protect our warming climate, the rising rate of authoritarians in the world. The loss of heart that threatened Luke’s church, threatens you and me. “God will give to us whatever we ask for” scripture says as plain as day. And yet, prayer is no slot machine where we put in the prayer coin – and get the pay off when we pull the lever with our “Amen.” Prayer, real prayer, is sometimes a like a widow who stubbornly stands at a door with bloody knuckles crying out, “Where’s the justice?” and gets no answer. Honest people know this.

Jesus certainly did. Luke says he prayed all night on more than one occasion. And on the night of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Luke says: “And being in

² Sited by Fred Craddock in Interpretation Commentary, WMJK Pub. Page 210.

agony, Jesus prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood..." Imagine that! The greatest prayer who ever lived prayed three times for God to do something and all he heard was silence. So after Gethsemane, the idea that prayer is some kind of string we pull to get God to act can be forever dismissed.

Luke, then, asks the church – his and ours: "Knowing this about prayer, when the Son of Man comes back, will he find persistent faith with blood on its knuckles?" For faith, if it's really faith, lives sometimes with no answers and only the mystery of silence. It knocks until its knuckles bleed, and the trusts that on the other side of the door, there is Someone who knows us and loves us and will one day act to set things right.

What is it you pray over and over for, waiting for God to answer...maybe for our children struggling with an addiction or to make ends meet? Or for our grandchildren to have faith? Maybe for your marriage or for the strained relationship with others? For your family to work out its differences? For a health issue? Maybe it's for more younger families to fill our churches? Or, maybe it's praying for politicians and judges to be elected or appointed who are ethical and have integrity? What is it you tug on God's arm to ask, knocking at the door of his heart waiting upon an answer - trusting it will come?

After WW II and the defeat of an evil authoritarian by the allied troops, British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was asked to give a commencement address. His speech consisted of only 8 words. This is what he said: "Never, never, never, never, never, never give up!"

Jesus' insistent message in this parable is for us to look at a problem square in the face and say: "I'll never quit praying. I'll never quit believing. I'll never stop trusting God to bring a victory out of whatever dilemmas or difficulties we're facing.

When the late Senator from Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey, was fighting cancer and losing the battle, he wrote an article titled "You can't quit!" In it, he said, "My faith and hope get me from day to day. The biggest mistake people make is giving up. Adversity (he says) is an experience, not a final act. Some people look at a setback as an end. Most of us have enough problems that almost any day we could fold up and say: 'I've had it.' But you can't quit. That isn't the way our country was built."

There was a point somewhere this past week when I went from having to preach a sermon to having a sermon I have to preach - realizing the reason Jesus told this parable is because so much is at stake.

And so Jesus asks his disciples at the end of this parable "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth - stubborn saints who won't stop praying for the right to overtake the wrong, who refuse to give up or give in or roll over in resignation when our prayers aren't answered, who remain engaged issues of justice until justice is served, who are prepared to exchange the politeness of the prayers with folded hands for the honest prayers of clinched, bloody fists?

Children don't give up on making requests of their dads or moms. Nuns of Charity don't stop pestering donors for needed support. Middle-aged widows don't give up beating a path to the door of judges. They do whatever it takes to get the attention and responses they need. In the requests we bring to God, we shouldn't settle for

anything less. Remember, there is a stubborn streak that runs through the saints. They keep on praying, and they don't give up or lose heart... because so much is at stake.

PRAYER: Faithful God, we pray not only for persistence in or life of prayer, but also patience. Give us a faith that, despite any difficulties we face, places its full trust in you. And help us to open the door to our own heart where we can listen to you. As we draw near to you, draw near to us that we may be strengthened in spirit, renewed in faith, and uplifted in hope, through Jesus Christ in whom we trust and by whose name we are confident to pray. Amen.