

Persistence Pays Off!

October 20, 2013

Luke 18: 1-8

1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' " 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples a parable because they were having problems with prayer. We all have problems with prayer. Jesus disciples even were having problems with prayer. That is probably why Jesus told them this parable.

We have many questions and issues and problems about prayer. Mainly we wonder if prayer is really heard by God. So many of our prayers seem unanswered: We pray for health, but there is still a spot on the X-ray. We pray for peace, but the troops are not home and the war rages. We pray for our children, but they still get into trouble.

We have problems with prayer, but when we go all the way down, our deepest problem with prayer is that WE lose heart. We just lose heart. We lose confidence and trust and hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. We lose heart. So Jesus told them and tells us a parable that we might pray always and not lose heart.

The story that Jesus told his disciples was about a horrible judge. This judge hated people and he hated God. He did not go to church and he refused to give to the United Way. He is the kind of corrupt judge who makes a mockery out of the title "Your Honor."

Unfortunately, appearing in his courtroom was a poor widow who needed justice but had nothing. She had no money, she had no husband, she had no standing, she had no power, she had no resources, she had nothing. She was so insignificant, she probably could not have gotten justice in a good courtroom with a good judge, but here she was in the courtroom of the worst judge in the land.

Now, did I say that she had nothing? That is not quite accurate. She did have one thing. She had the capacity to be a pest, to annoy. Moreover, when you only have one weapon, you use it. Therefore, she annoyed this judge constantly. She shouted aloud for justice in his courtroom: "Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!" She knocked on his chamber doors, left messages on his answering machine. She probably even found him teeing off at the Golf Club shouting, "Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!"

Finally, she wore the old judge down. The judge said to himself, "You know, I don't care about justice. I don't care about this widow, I don't like people, I don't like God and I don't care about anybody. But this woman is about to drive me crazy! I'm going to give her what she wants just to get her off my back."

And that's the story that Jesus told us that we might pray always and not lose heart. Now, what are we supposed to get out of that story that will help us pray always and not lose heart?

Well, some people say that maybe Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focused on the bad judge. He does tell the disciples, “Pay attention to what this unjust judge says.” And if we pay attention to the judge, well, what do we see? What we see is that, even though he was a horrible man, at the end of the day he did give the woman the justice that she demanded and needed. So maybe what Jesus is teaching us is that, even though the headlines in the newspaper often show a world of corruption and evil, this is, you know, God's world, this is a world ruled and overruled by a loving and just God, and at the end of the day, there is justice after all. Maybe that is what Jesus wants us to see.

Well, I believe that and I think that is part of it, but I do not think that is not the heart of Jesus' story, because if that is all Jesus wanted us to see, the moral of this story would be, “Take heart. Things are not as bad as they seem.” But the moral of this story is “Pray always and do not lose heart.”

OK, maybe Jesus wants us to focus our attention on the poor widow. Did you notice how she went after what she needed? It was, after all, her persistence—“Give me justice! Give me justice!”—that managed to wrangle justice from the unjust judge.

Well, that is another part of the story, to be sure. Nevertheless, that is not all of it. If that were the whole meaning of Jesus' story, then the moral of the story would be “Be feisty. Pray always.” But the moral of this story is, “Pray always and don't lose heart.”

No, Jesus' story is not finally about the bad judge and it is not finally about the insistent widow. It is finally a story about God and about you and me. This story says, if a poor widow with no standing can finally wrangle justice out of a judge without honor, how much more will you—God's own child, the one God formed in the womb, the God who has loved you from the very beginning—find a God who will hear and answer prayer.

There is a famous and familiar story about a young boy named Frank who was walking along the bank of the Mississippi River and he noticed in the river another boy about his age wrestling with a homemade raft. He said to him, “What are you doing?” He said, “I'm going to take this raft out to that island in the middle of the river. I dare you to go with me!” Well, Frank could not resist the dare so he scrambled down the bank and got on the raft. The two boys headed out to the middle of the river but the current was swift and strong. As they approached the island, the raft broke up and sank and they had to swim to the island. And there they were, abandoned on an island, late in the afternoon. Nobody knew where they were. What would they do?

Right at that moment, one of those paddle-wheel steamers started coming down the river and Frank ran to the edge of the island and began screaming and waving his hands, “Help! Help!” The other boy said, “Don't waste your breath. They can't hear you and even if they could they wouldn't pay any attention to boys like us.” But just at that moment the paddlewheel steamer turned toward the island. The boy said to Frank, “How did you do that?” And Frank said, “Well, there's something you don't know. The captain of that boat is my father!”

Well, God hears us even when we do not believe God does. God hears our prayers for one another and for ourselves and God answers those prayers even sometimes in ways we do not expect. I know one of my favorite country songs is by Garth Brooks called “Unanswered Prayers.” The chorus resounds out that “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.” I used to get frustrated with this but I also recognize the wisdom in this song. Just because we do not see the supposed answers to our prayers does not mean that God does not hear our prayers or understand our needs. What this means is that we have to be more persistent and more insistent and although Garth is claiming God did not answer his prayers it seems that God did, just not in the way

expected, just as God used the immoral Judge to answer the woman's prayers in a way unexpected. Persistence does pay off in matters of prayer, the pay off just might be different from what you initially prayed to receive.

So pray with me,

God, we recognize in ourselves that you truly answer are prayers whether in the exact ways we expect or not we are given what we need and we are so blessed to have your love poured out for us and to be in relationship with you that you hear our cries and answer us. We are blessed beyond measure that you care and that you listen and we are blessed to be your children who receive your grace and mercy and love. Amen.