

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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10/21/07

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. [2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. [3] In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' [4] For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, [5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' [6] And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. [7] And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? [8] I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

JUST SAY NO

Edward Bennett Williams was a powerful lawyer. He owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles. At one time he had the privilege of representing such notables as Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon.

One day he was visited by Mother Teresa. Williams was the chairman of a small charitable trust, and Mother Teresa hoped that he would make a contribution to her AIDS hospice.

Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do."

They decided that the best thing to do was to politely hear what she had to say and then say "no" to her request.

Mother Teresa arrived. They said that she looked like a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the lawyer's huge mahogany desk. She made her appeal, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but I'm afraid my answer has to be no."

Mother Teresa said simply, “Let us pray.” Williams and Dietrich bowed their heads, and she prayed. And then she made the same pitch for her AIDS hospice. Again Williams politely said “no”. And again Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.”

Exasperated Williams looked up at the ceiling and said, “All right, all right get me my checkbook!” Sometimes persistence in prayer pays off!

THE WIDOW AND THE JUDGE

And that’s the point of our parable for today. Jesus told his disciples a parable about an absolutely horrible judge. He didn’t like people, he didn’t like God. He didn’t go to church, and he refused to pledge to the United Way.

There is the implication that he dispensed justice on an economic sliding scale. More money could buy you more justice.

But, this poor widow had nothing. She had no money. She had no husband. She had no social standing. She had no power. She had nothing.

Even if she had gotten a good judge she was the type that probably wouldn’t have gotten a fair shake. But, she got this notorious judge who didn’t care about anything but himself. And she had nothing, no way to defend herself.

Actually, that’s not quite true. She did have one thing. She had persistence. She could be really annoying. She was a pest. And so she did the only thing that she could do. She pestered the unjust judge.

She shouted aloud for justice in his courtroom. He had her jailed for contempt of court, but it did no good. She pounded on the doors to his chambers; she filled up his answering machine with her messages.

I think the final straw occurred when she showed up on the golf course when the old judge was just about to tee off with his cronies. In the middle of his backswing she began to shout, “Give me justice. Give me justice. Give me justice.” His friends asked, “Who is that crazy woman?”

That night the judge had a conversation with himself. He often talked to himself since no one else really wanted to listen. He said, “I really don’t believe in God, and I’m not really fond of people. But, this old woman is driving me crazy. My golf buddies are going to kick me out of our foursome if I don’t do something fast. I know. I’ll give her what she wants. Then she’ll leave me alone.”

That’s the story Jesus told us ... well, a somewhat updated version of the story Jesus told us, and the Bible tells us that he told that story so that we might pray and not lose heart. The story is easy enough to understand; the idea of praying and not losing heart is easy enough to understand. But, the thing that’s not so apparent is how this story and this maxim are related.

PRAY ALWAYS AND DON’T LOSE HEART

Some people emphasize the idea that we should persist in our prayers. Like Mother Teresa we should refuse to take “no” for an answer. As the widow banged on the doors of the unjust judge, we should bang on the doors of heaven.

We should be feisty prayer warriors. We should pray all the time. It’s kind of a Nike version of spirituality. You know. Life’s short. Pray hard.

But, is that really what this parable is teaching us? Praying hard and praying always is just half of the lesson. Jesus said “pray always and don’t lose heart”. We often forget about the importance of that second statement.

We pray always because we don’t lose heart. In other words, we keep praying not because we think that we will always get our way ... with the unjust judge or with God. The reason we keep praying is that we have a hope that transcends the troubles of this world. The judges may be corrupt, the stock market may fall, the war might drag on, and our friends might betray us, but we believe that this is not the end of the story.

Even an unjust judge might be persuaded to dispense justice from time to time. How much more just and loving will God be toward those whom He loves?

Prayer is based upon a firm grasp of our identity in Christ Jesus. Who are we? The Bible tells us that we are God's children. God formed us in the womb. God loved us from the very beginning. God hears and answers our prayers.

God is on the side of righteousness and justice. And so our prayers should not be stopped by the discouraging words we hear on the nightly news because we believe the nightly news will not have the final word. God will have the last word.

MY FATHER IS THE CAPTAIN

There's an old story about a boy named Frank who saw a friend struggling with a makeshift raft on the banks of the Mississippi River. Frank asked his friend, "What are you doing?" And the boy replied, "I'm going to take this raft to that island in the middle of the river. I dare you to go with me."

Well, you know how it is with a dare and young boys. It was an offer Frank couldn't refuse, but he should have. In the middle of the river the raft came apart, and the boys were caught in the strong current of the river.

With great effort they managed to swim to the island, but now they were in real trouble. The sun was going down, they were soaked to the bone, and no one knew where they were. What would they do?

About that time one of those paddle wheel steamers began coming down the river. Frank ran to the bank and began to shout, "Help us. Help us."

The other boy said, "Don't waste your breath. They can't hear us. And even if they could they wouldn't waste time on trying to help boys like us."

But, just at that moment the boat turned toward the island. In amazement the boy turned to Frank and asked, "How did you do that?" And Frank replied, "There's something that you don't know. The captain of that boat is my father!"

The captain of the universe is our Father, and He hears our cries.

PRAYER IS CALLING MY FATHER

When my father died, the greatest loss I felt was the fact that I could not give him a call and get his advice and tell him what had been going on in my life. It wasn't that I really needed his advice. I knew what he would say before I even asked for his advice.

It wasn't that he able to give me what I wanted and needed all the time. His resources were limited. More than that, he knew that I had to make it on my own. The only way I could grow was to struggle and sometimes make mistakes.

He didn't always tell me what I wanted to hear. In fact sometimes he challenged my plans and my thinking.

So, why did I call on my father so often? I called my father because I knew that he cared and wanted the best for me. Talking to him always seemed to help. Talking to my father restored my sense of hope and confidence when things weren't going so well. Quite often those discussions kept me from losing heart.

And I think that is the essence of prayer. Prayer is not about getting what we want when we want it. Prayer is the joy and security of a relationship with our Heavenly Father. And prayer is the challenge of hearing what we need to hear instead of what we want to hear.

When I bring the joys and sorrows of my life to God, I do it for the same reason that I used to call my father on the phone. There is power in that relationship that transcends the struggles of this day.

THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

The power of prayer is not found primarily in miraculous healings and blessings claimed. The power of prayer is the power of hope for the future. That is the essence of faith. In the book of Hebrews we read that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Many people think about prayer in too simplistic a way. They think, “I want this so I’m going to pray to God and see if I can get it.” But, prayer is not about getting what we want. Prayer is about establishing and developing a relationship with God.

And when we establish that relationship, the answers to prayer often come slower and deeper. The answers come in ways that we would never expect.

Yes, God may heal our diseases as a sign of that coming Kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain. God might miraculously bless us with something that we need. An unjust judge might dispense justice because some saint is persistent in her request.

We should rejoice when this happens, and praise God.

But, we also know that it doesn’t always happen that way. In fact quite often the sick are not healed. The desperate request for help is left unanswered. And the nightly news is filled with stories of “man’s inhumanity to man”.

How can we maintain faith in such terrible, frightening times? How can we not lose heart when the world is beset by terror and terrorism? It seems that the sun is going down on this island of despair, and no one is concerned about the children’s cries for help.

The voice of evil whispers in our ear, “Give up. No one cares about an insignificant person like you. You are stranded and alone. The best you can do is care for yourself and those that are closest to you.”

But, we who are disciples of Jesus Christ have a different view. We have an answer for the cynics who want us to give in and give up. We believe in a God who hears our cries. We believe in a God who loves us and wants to bring justice to an unjust world.

And because of this hope, we refuse to give up and give in to the critics of the world who are always ready to believe the worst. We are willing be patient and persistent in our prayers and in our life.

Despite much evidence to the contrary we still believe that this is our Father's world. And even when the world does its worst, even when the world crucifies the Son of God on a cross, evil has not won the day. There is a salvation that transcends and overcomes the evil of this world.

HOTEL RWANDA

There is a powerful movie entitled Hotel Rwanda. It is the story of those dark days in 1994 when that part of Africa descended into madness. One writer referred to those days as the "fastest and most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century." In only 100 days the Hutus killed over 800,000 Tutsis.

The film tells the story of that horror through the personal experiences of a hotel manager in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. The hotel manager who was a Hutu sought to shelter his wife and her family (who were Tutsis) from the horror of the massacre.

But, others began to beat on his door and seek shelter from the massacre as well. At first the manager resisted their pleas. He said that there was nothing that he could do. But, as the people continued to beat on his door and ask for help, it was as if they were beating on the door to his conscience.

The hotel manager began to shelter people from the massacre and was able to save over 1,200 people from death by hiding them in the hotel. But, the hotel manager is not the only one who is forced to answer the knocking at the door of his conscience in this movie. Those watching the movie are faced with the same dilemma.

About halfway through the massacre, the story is picked up by Western journalists. They began to capture images of the genocide on videotape. The hotel manager was heartened by this. He thought that if the Western world saw those images they would intervene immediately. But, one reporter expressed skepticism.

The hotel manager replied, "How can they see that and not intervene?" But, the jaded reporter had seen it all before. He said, "More likely they will see the footage, say 'isn't that horrible,' and then go back to eating their dinner."

A MIRROR OF OUR OWN LIVES

That's what many of us did. It is the truth not only in this instance but in a thousand other tragedies that have come to our attention. We think, "That's too bad. But, what can I do? It's out of my hands."

Is that true? Is the prayer for justice a useless prayer? One commentator wrote, "To those who have it in their power to relieve ... distress ... but do not, the call to pray day and night is a command to let the priorities of God reorder the priorities of their lives."

One preacher made a radical suggestion when it came to interpreting this passage. He suggested that this parable is a mirror of our lives. And the face we see when we look in that mirror is the face of the unjust judge.

We often say by our actions that we neither fear God nor care about the sufferings of our fellow human beings.

That interpretation really makes this into an uncomfortable story. We don't like to look at ourselves in this way. But, maybe there is still hope ... even if we look at this story from that "radical" perspective.

In the parable even the judge reaches a tipping point. The judge comes to a point when he does the right thing ... even if he does it for the wrong reasons. He gives the woman justice.

And establishing justice for the least and lost of the world seems to be a priority for God throughout the Bible. From the prophets to Jesus to the early church the message is the same. God wants justice for those "little ones" who have not received any justice. God is in the business of righting wrongs and protecting those who have no one to protect them.

The Bible tells us that God comes to us in the form of those who are knocking at our door asking for help. The Bible tells us that God comes to us in the form of a widow who is asking for justice from an unjust judge. The widow kept on knocking and asking; in the same way God keeps on knocking and asking us for justice. He asks us to align our ways with his ways.

This view of prayer is not so easy to accept. The God to whom we pray always requires something of us.

The life of prayer is not some serene escape from the world. It is a struggle for justice and hope in the world.

It is not an easy life. Such a life will require constant prayer on our part. It will require great faith and courage.

But, we are encouraged by the fact that no matter what the struggle or the injustice, God does not give up on us. Whether we are the unjust judge, the persistent widow or someone in between, God loves us enough to listen to us and struggle with us and help us become the people that we are called to be.

We are not alone in this world. The captain of the universe is also our Heavenly Father. He has known us even before we were born. He loves us and cares for us. We are his sheep, and He is our shepherd. When we cry out for help whether it is day or night; He hears us.

And he sends us out to bring that hope to the world in many different ways.

And that's why we should pray always and not lose heart.

Amen.