

Text: Luke 18:1-8
Title: Wearing Down God
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Roger Allen Nelson

There is an iconic scene in *Family Guy* – the bawdy animated sitcom. Stewie, the baby with the football-shaped-head, toddles up to Louis, his mother. She’s sitting on the bed, exhausted and staring straight ahead. Stewie says, “Louis. Louis. Louis. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mommy. Mommy. Mommy. Mommy. Ma. Ma. Ma. Ma. Mum. Mum. Mum. Mummy. Mummy. Momma. Momma....”

Finally, Louis whirls around and yells, “What?” To which Stewie replies, “Hi!” and runs out of the room giggling.

With millions of views on YouTube, the genius of that scene is that we all know the incessant insistent demands of a child. We’ve experienced the relentless requests that eventually wear down even the strongest among us. Annoying or endearing we know the voice of one who won’t give up.

And that seems to be what Jesus wants.

Pray like that.

Pray with persistence.

Pray with insistence.

Pray like Stewie.

Pray like the widow.

For even a corrupt judge will eventually give in and say, “Yes.” How much more the one who created you and calls you his own? If that bloke eventually crumbles and answers the widow’s request – just imagine what your Heavenly Father will do!

Maybe that’s all there is to this parable. As Luke puts it:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

This isn’t a puzzling parable or a colorful story with a surprising twist. This isn’t the way of the world turned on its head; this is a direct volley – a clear shot. Pray without ceasing and never lose heart. And, maybe that’s enough. To use Jesus’ language from a few chapters earlier:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened....

Who can argue with that? Surely not the women who gather at Hope to pray on the first Monday of every month....

There's a team of women who meet here to pray. With tenacity and tenderness they pray for the church, for our children, and for our seniors. They pray for babies in the womb and those grieving the death of loved ones. They pray for the sick and the suffering. They pray in joy, they pray in sorrow, and they've been doing it for years! They pray for you. They're a living embodiment of this parable. Thanks be to God.

Therefore, let's make this a short sermon. Let's heed this call and pray up a storm. Let's beat a path to God's door and keep pounding until our knuckles bleed. For, surely God will answer. Around you sit those who can bear witness to persistence in prayer. Again, thanks be to God.

And yet....

And yet, there's something unsettling here....

What of the family that prays faithfully for years only to watch a loved one waste away in the stench of chemo and cancer? What of the couple struggling with infertility? How many prayers for how long? What of the longsuffering prayers that the scourge of gun violence will not take one more child's life? What of the parent praying for a child who can't shake the black dog of depression? How many prayers for how long?

Do we just hang those prayers on the knowledge that God is answering – just not the answer that we're longing for, praying for, waiting for, or pleading for? Is it a matter of effort and we need to knock longer and louder? Maybe it has to do us....

Dear friends, is that all scripture has to offer? Prayer as a divine slot machine that responds to those who keep putting in nickels. Surely prayer is something more than waiting for God to fix things on our behalf. Surely there must be something more than the instruction to pester God until God finally answers our prayer...

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

What are we to make of this parable?

Does it turn on God being more generous than a midlevel magistrate? Is it about the plucky persistence of the widow? Is this about the nature of faith or the nature of God? Is it a rallying call to storm the gates of heaven and a challenge to those of us who are lollygagging on the spiritual sidelines? What are we to make of this parable?

Maybe this is helpful....

The widow in the parable is emblematic of the most vulnerable and voiceless in society. Widows had few rights. Their late husband's property was transferred right through them to their closest male relative. Their status was determined by their relationship to a man.

But the courts made space for widows. Old Testament law required judges to listen to their concerns. That requirement was only superseded by the needs of orphans.

So, this judge – no matter how puffed up with pride – was obligated to listen to the widow. Now. He could have been dismissive, he could have been distracted, but rightfully this widow would not be shuffled to the side. And therefore,....

she kept after him,
she kept crying out,
she kept demanding to be heard,
she kept pleading her case,
until he gave in.

Quite frankly, the Greek here is more colorful than our English translation. The judge finally folds saying,

I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and give me a black eye...

The sense of the word “attack” (our translation) is that of striking one under the eye. The judge wasn't compassionate to the widow's circumstances; he was worried about her left hook. He didn't want to explain the shiner to the barristers around the bar, so he hears her case and grants her justice.

We should also note that this parable only appears in Luke's gospel and it comes hot on the heels of Jesus talking about the end of the age. He says to his disciples:

I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left. “Where Lord?” They asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body there the vultures will gather.”

Gulp! Yikes! Shiver!

And, with that Jesus takes a deep breath and launches into this peculiar-point-blank-parable-about-prayer....

Maybe it's helpful to remember that Luke wrote his gospel some twenty years after Jesus. And, at that time the followers of Jesus were trying to make sense of his life, death, and resurrection while hanging-on to the extraordinary promise that he would return. A return they expected to be imminent.

But, as they waited, and Jesus didn't come back, they became discouraged and dismayed. They lost heart. There was a Roman boot on their necks. They knew suffering and abuse. Justice seemed a long way off, and a promise delayed felt like a promise betrayed. So, it was easy to be disillusioned, disenchanted, and despairing. How long do we keep singing that “the world's about the turn”?

Dear friends, there's an eschatological dimension to this parable.

I'm not sure that it amounts to the simple equation: prayer equals effort multiplied by time. I'm not sure the encouragement is to just keep bringing your to-do list to God because eventually God will give-in and release the storehouses of heaven.

This is about the longing for that day when widows and orphans will receive justice. This is about that day when peace will prevail. This is about that day when a table will be spread for all. This is about that day when God will make his

dwelling with people, and the very hand of God will wipe away the last tear – for the old order of things has passed away.

And so, maybe, this parable is not so much instruction about how to pray as it is a picture of God granting justice and putting the world to rights. Maybe this parable is not so much about our persistence in prayer as it is about God's unrelenting faithfulness to his promises.

Therefore, don't lose heart. Don't give up faith. Keep praying – for that day is surely coming when justice and mercy will kiss.

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

As one scholar puts it:

When justice seems far off, we pray. When rejection is near at hand, we pray. We persist in praying for what is right. We keep our hearts focused on the coming kingdom and its characteristics. In the face of injustice, we do the right thing and pray for God to show himself as the just judge who makes peace and punishment as it should be.

It strikes me that belief in God is relatively easy. Most people believe in God – an anonymous amorphous deity, distant and mysterious. And, worship of that God may even have its own culturally conditioned beauty: the language of liturgy, the glory of singing, choral music beautifully rendered, the smells and bells, the silence. Even sitting with a circle of church friends has its own goodness. Belief or worship of God is doable. But, prayer?

Prayer gives that vague God a certain name and a particular urgency. Prayer is the comforting or confounding recognition that God has personhood. Prayer is the faith – even the size of a mustard seed – that God “is.”

And, while the actual form of prayer may be incidental, any prayer that has even a shred of authenticity, hopes or believes that God can or will act. And prayer, therefore, is finally longing for God's will, God's way, and God's justice and mercy in this world.

Dear friends, may our lives be marked by faithful enduring prayer. May we be among those who are found faithful – still praying in the dawning light of that great morning when Jesus shall return to answer every prayer we've ever whispered.

Amen.