



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 18:1-8
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Praying Through God's Silence

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

For Ruthie McGregor it was just another day of work. For 35 years she had dragged herself out of bed five days a week and commuted into the city where she was employed as a county welfare worker fielding requests for assistance. Each day people lined up at her window: single moms, prostitutes, drug addicts, homeless, hopeless looking men out of work. In 35 years she had seen it all and heard it all. She had developed a hard shell around her heart that kept her from ever really buying into the stories she heard. What started out as a job that would allow her to help people soon became her excuse for cynicism. She was never really all that religious anyway, but this job had convinced her that no God worth believing in would let a mess like this just go on and on.

So, that day, when she noticed a woman she had never seen before step up to her window, she just braced herself for another sob story. Sure enough, the woman gave her some woeful tale of how her ex-husband and her former employer and her landlord had all done her wrong. Ruthie had heard this a million times before. There was nothing she could do to help. The woman couldn't prove her residency; she didn't even have an up to date driver's license. Ruthie sent her away.

The next day Ruthie was surprised to see that same woman slowly inching herself towards the front of the line. "What's this?" Ruthie thought. "A persistent one." She gave her the same sob story, only this time a bit more desperate. Ruthie didn't budge. But, the next day, she couldn't believe her eyes. The same woman was in her line, only this time she was crying and making a scene. Ruthie began to figure she was one of the crazies. When she finally arrived at the window she treated her like one. But this was getting old.

That night Ruthie couldn't get to sleep. She could just imagine that same woman standing in line the next morning making a scene. Ruthie was way beyond caring what people thought of her, but she was getting worn out by this. That's when she decided to do whatever she could just to get rid of her. She wasn't asking for much. Ruthie knew how to work the system. She could pull a few strings. Anything for one day of peace. The next day, sure enough, there she was. Ruthie shook her head as she saw that his time the woman carried a sign that said, "Justice now!" When the woman arrived at the window, before she could say a word, Ruthie had all her paperwork processed and, with a look of defeat, handed her a check. The woman walked away, finally, satisfied.

You might wonder if that's a true story. The fact is, it's one of those stories that is not true but it is true to life. It's a story that could have happened a million times, and it's a story that teaches us something not just about life in general but about life with God.

I. Jesus told a story to encourage us to pray and not lose heart.

You see, in Luke 18 Jesus told a story very much like the one I just told. He said, "**There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.'**"

You can see that this story is not unlike the one I told. First, you have this judge. Like Ruthie, even though

he was in a position to help people, he had grown hard. As a Jew, he was supposed to fear God, he was supposed to do his work with a view to the ultimate Judge. In the OT, the godly King Jehoshaphat appointed judges with these orders, **“Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the LORD who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness, or partiality, or the taking of a bribe”** (2 Chron. 19:6-7). But this judge didn’t fear God nor did he care about justice. So when this widow came along, asking for legal protection, he blew her off. We tend to think of widows as old, but in that society many widows were young. We don’t know specifically what the issue was, but widows were the most defenseless people of that day. They were often taken advantage of. We don’t know what the specific problem was, but later in Luke 20:47 Jesus indicts the scribes and Pharisees because they “devour widow’s houses.”

But just like the woman in my story, this widow wouldn’t let up. She didn’t have any money to bribe him with, so she thought, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll pester him. I’ll be on him like a shirt until he gives me the protection I need.” We can imagine her confronting him in front of his friends out on the golf course and at lunch with his colleagues, calling him at home, pestering him at the market. Her chances of redress were slim with this godless, hardened, cynical man, but this was the only thing she could do. At first, we think that there is no way this guy will budge. There’s no justice for a person like that.

But then he says to himself, perhaps as he lies in bed one night, “I could care less about God. I could care less about this woman. And I could care less about what people think, but I’m sick and tired of this woman badgering me. I’ll just give her the legal protection she wants so she’ll leave me alone.” When

he says “she will wear me out” he uses a term that literally means “she will blacken my eye.” This crusty old judge had met his match! He gives her the justice she pleaded for.

II. There is a wrong way to understand this story.

Now the real question is, why did Jesus tell this story? Fortunately, Luke tells us in his own introduction. In v. 1 Luke says, **“He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.”** It seems pretty simple. We humans are like the widow. Impoverished, powerless, penniless, we’re unable to handle our problems alone. We need help from someone more powerful than us. God, then, must be like this judge. He’s not really all that interested in our situation. After all, he has a universe to run, he has angels to keep in line, he has world history to direct. But, we can always do what the widow did. We can always pester him to death. Bang on the doors of heaven. Spend hours on our knees. Fast for 30 days. Ask our friends to pester him too. Sooner or later, maybe we’ll wear him out. We’ll wrench a blessing from his tightly closed fist. Finally, he’ll say, “Okay, okay, if I give you what you want, will you just shut up!”

Does that sound right to you? I hope not. Do you view prayer that way? Do you view yourself as bothersome to God? Do you view him as stingy with his time and help? Some of us approach prayer as if the most important thing is to find the lost key that will somehow unlock the vault of God’s blessings, which he would really prefer not to open.

III. If this is what an unrighteous judge did, how much more will God answer those who cry out to him day and night.

But, you see, to understand this story you must first see that God is NOT like the unrighteous judge. God is righteous, God cares about people; he cares about justice; he cares about making wrongs right. The psalmist prays to God, **“But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth”** (Ps. 86:15).

Not only that, but we’re not like the the widow. She

was poor, powerless, forgotten and abandoned. She had no relationship with the judge. For him, she was just another item to cross off his to-do list. But we're not abandoned and forgotten. Through Christ we've been adopted into God's family. We're his beloved sons and daughters. He loves for us to come into his presence. He loves to bless us and give to us.

You see, Jesus told this story as a study in contrast. It's of the "if this is true, how much more is this true" variety. Luke says Jesus wants to teach us to pray and not lose heart. So Jesus tells a story about how an unrighteous judge answered a widow's repeated pleas for justice. He is saying, "If an unrighteous judge did that, how more will God who is righteous, holy and loving answer the cries of his children, not because they badger him, but because he loves them. So don't lose heart."

Actually, Jesus interprets his story for us. Look what the Lord says in vv. 6-8, **"Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"**

Notice how Jesus calls us his "*elect*" or his "*chosen ones*." Again, we're not like the widow in the story with no connections, we belong to him. Notice also how Jesus asks in v. 7, **"will he delay long over them?" Or, as the NIV puts it, "will he keep putting them off?"** That's what the judge did. The answer is, no. Though we may have to wait, though the delay may seem long to us, when God chooses to act he will act quickly. Remember, to God one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day (2 Peter 3:8).

IV. We must persist in faith and prayer for justice until he comes.

A. We cry out for justice: There are a few other things I want you to notice about what Jesus says here. Notice what it is we're crying out for. We're crying out day and night for justice. There are other things that we can

and should ask God for, but this story is about justice. What is it that God will bring about for his chosen ones? It's justice. Justice means to make wrongs right. You see, Jesus knew that his people would go through tough times. There would be times when they would be lied about and treated with disdain. And he knew that we live in a world where a lot of things happen to us that just aren't right. You may have experienced injustice on a very personal level—in a marriage or a friendship or a job. I remember visiting a Mexican prison and having three women accost me and my friends, insisting that they had been wrongfully imprisoned, begging for justice. We wonder why God allows these things to happen. There is so much injustice that we wonder if he really cares. Jesus says that God cares about justice. He cares about making the wrongs of this world and your wrongs right.

B. Justice will come when Christ returns:

Notice also WHEN this justice will come. In v. 8 he talks about **"when the Son of Man comes."** If you were here last week you know that Jesus has been talking to his disciples about his return. Remember how he said in 17:24, **"For just as the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day."** That's what he's talking about here. You can't rip this parable out of its context. Jesus is still talking about the second coming. Last week we talked about "the already and the not yet" of the kingdom. It is already here because he is here but it is not yet here in its fullness. We're still waiting for him to return and make all things right. Well, in this parable, he is telling us how to live in the "not yet." What do you do while you wait and experience injustice? You work for justice. You keep praying. Sometimes we see progress, even here on earth, but when he comes, he'll bring justice fully and quickly.

C. Meanwhile, we must persist in faith and prayer: Which brings me to the last thing I want you to notice. Jesus leaves us with a question: **"However when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the**

earth?" He wouldn't have asked that question if it wasn't going to be hard. He says, "It's going to seem like a long time. A lot of things are going to happen that will cause you to question whether or not God really cares. But meanwhile, you must keep the faith. You must keep praying not because he needs to be badgered into responding, but because he loves you and cares for you and always has time for you. Despite appearances, your prayers really do matter.

The Ring Nebula, in the constellation Lyra, looks, through binoculars, like a smoke ring. It's in the process of exploding. Light from its explosion first reached the earth in 1054. It was a supernova then, and bright enough to shine in the daytime. Now it is not so bright, but it is still exploding. It expands at a rate of 70 million miles a day. But if you look through binoculars at this thing that's expanding at a rate of 70 million miles a day, it doesn't appear to budge. As a matter of fact, pictures of the Ring Nebula taken 15 years ago seem identical to the ones taken yesterday. You see, huge happenings are not always visible to the naked eye. What if prayer is like that? We pray and pray and it seems like nothing changes. But that's only true from our perspective. Perhaps from God's perspective there are a galaxy of details being set in place for the moment when he brings his answer to fulfillment.

If we could only see how much our prayers matter to him. In the book of Revelation the apostle John has a magnificent vision of heaven. He sees God seated on his throne, like a jasper stone in appearance. There is a great rainbow around the throne, like an emerald. Around the throne he sees 24 thrones and on those thrones sit 24 elders clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads. Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Before the throne there are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. And

then John mentions something that if you're not careful you could miss. He says that the four living creatures and the 24 elders all fall down before the throne and each one is holding two things: a harp and golden bowls full of incense. He doesn't tell us what the harp represented, most likely just praise, but he does tell us what the golden bowls full of incense are. He says these are the prayers of the saints. And later these prayers are on the golden altar which is before the throne and like the smoke of incense they rise up before God. Sometimes we think our prayers go nowhere. But John saw that they continually waft before the throne of God. The Father breathes in these prayers. They are a delight to him. They are precious to him. Matthew Henry says, "These prayers, thus accepted in heaven, produced great changes upon earth."

CONCLUSION

So let me ask you this morning, has anyone here given up on prayer? For some of us, it's like a diet or an exercise program. We want to lose weight so we try it for awhile and it doesn't work, so we quit. Have you quit on prayer?

Sometimes we want to quit when we don't feel his presence. We pray and pray and it feels like we're talking to a wall. Sometimes we want to give up when God doesn't give us what we ask. We pray and pray for something that seems to us to be a good thing in keeping with his will and it doesn't happen. Deep down we feel betrayed or confused. Sometimes we just can't understand why God allows so many wrongs in this world. We're like the prophet Jeremiah when he complained to the Lord, "**You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease**" (Jer. 12:1)? When we see the way of the wicked prosper and God seems to just stand by, we want to give up praying. But Jesus says, don't stop.

Charles Kuralt used to produce fascinating TV stories about his travels across America. In one of his books he tells about a time he and his crew visited a little chapel in La Crosse, Wisconsin. There Franciscan Sisters have been praying *without interruption* for a hundred years! Every hour of every day and night for a century, two sisters have been on their knees, side by side, always praying for the same things—for an end to sickness and hunger, for an end to social injustice, for wisdom in high places, for their city and their country, for their friends, for their enemies, for all people, including you and me—always ending, “Bring peace to the world.” Sister Mileta first took her place in this chain of prayer in 1915. Kuralt asked her, “So you're just going to go on praying for another hundred years?” Sister Mileta answered, “Hopefully, yes. Hopefully, we can go on for another hundred years, and perhaps another hundred years, till the end of time.”

If Jesus were here, he might just say “Amen” to that!

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