



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 20, 2019
GENESIS 32:22-31; PSALM 121; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5; LUKE 18:1-8

DOES GOD NEED TO BE NAGGED?

Luke 18:1-8 [Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"]

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always. Isn't that what our ears glom onto when we hear this passage? We need to pray always. Do YOU pray always? Hmm... Do I pray always? Gulp!

And what if we *don't* pray always? Is that why some of our prayers aren't answered?

So I ask you: DOES GOD NEED TO BE NAGGED?
Is that how the Divine works?

All right, that's a lot of questions. And I don't want to lead you on: I'm certainly not going to explain how the Divine works. God is bigger. But I am *sure*, in my deepest heart and experience, of two things: **God does not NEED to be nagged. And... God does not MIND being nagged.**

Because this passage we just read is about how much God loves us. Because although what we tend to hear loudly in this scripture is the truncated phrase "Pray always" – which, if you're like me, can make you feel like a slacker – we forget the rest of the sentence, about not losing heart.

Jesus knows how hard it is, and how much harder it's going to get, to be his disciples. And how much harder it is going to get for HIM, too. How will they not lose heart?

And Jesus answers: Prayer. Persistently turning to God, in everything. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus speaking to God, going off by himself to pray, offering thanks, asking for what is needed. His connectedness to God is his source and his call. It is

how he doesn't lose heart. Jesus invites, even exhorts, his disciples to do the same. To pray always, so they won't lose heart.

I have to tell you, in doing exegesis for this sermon today, I came upon so many things about God "requiring" prayer, as if she's up there like some Bob Cratchit counting Scrooge's pennies into the ledger... so many notions of praying hard enough to convince God that we really mean it, to entice God to act. To NAG God into doing what we ask.

I don't buy it! It's not my experience of God's grace. God doesn't need our prayers to be God. The prayers are for US!

I know in the parable, it's the nagging that wears the unjust judge down, yes. But a parable points; it is a metaphor, not the exact depiction of Divine grace. Persistence in turning to God: that's the message I hear today. Persistence in turning to God is what brings us what we need, and what we need is deeper and deeper relationship with God in all aspects of our lives.

Because prayer isn't about transaction; it's about relationship.

Isn't that true in all things that we advocate for – Lord knows, especially in our post-truth society now? We respond, not when the numbers add up, but when things get personal, when there is relationship.

Relationship. For the six years that I went to seminary half time – not all that long ago – I worked full time for a leading think tank on the world's water, climate, and sustainability and justice. Our president, Dr. Peter Gleick, had been researching and publishing about climate change since 1989! When I was there doing Communications, it was 2008-2014. Even as the Institute's researchers pumped out more and more devastating facts about the trajectory of climate

change and the impending impacts, news reporters were still entrenched in quoting "both sides," because that's what we learn in journalism school – as if the overwhelming climate science was mere opinion, and climate change perhaps wouldn't happen if the oil company straw men claimed it wouldn't.

So we worked to change the knee-jerk reporting of the media away from climate change being two-sided. Peter was prominent and much sought after, and he started, with focused intention, to begin every media conversation and interview talking about climate change no longer being an issue of "two sides," but an issue of adapting and protecting people. And we began leading with the people, individuals, who would be affected, in whatever media market the journalist was from. People equals relationship – and relationship helped change the story more than numbers. We saw the coverage change.

You know this from any advocacy movement or nonprofit you've ever been a part of. The annual report may have charts and figures, but it also has people's stories, because it's the personal relationships that move people to support.

And we all know from our own experience in the world, that there are people who don't like you – be you an immigrant, or a person whose skin color is different, or a person who's gay, or a kid with a mohawk, or a homeless mother with two babies – until they actually get to meet you, to be in relationship with you – and then, things may change. Because for humans, relationship is what it's all about.

Well, our sacred Scriptures tell us we are made in the image of God. If we are more moved in relationship, *then you know where that comes from!* When we open

ourselves to God in prayer, we move deeper into the relationship God invites us to. So, to that first thing I KNOW: God doesn't need to be nagged to be in the relationship with us; God's already always there.

So why pray? Because we grow deeper in our relationship with the Divine when we are persistent in pursuing that connection, that invitation, a conversation. That's what I hear in "pray always."

God already loves us; God already knows what we need – whether we cry out day and night, as in almost half of the Psalms, or when we're cold and lost and dry in prayer. God is with us in all of it, drawing us to Godself, our deepest connection. It starts with God's beckon. All the way back in Genesis, in the Garden, God called to Adam – post-apple! And in our first reading today, also Genesis, these first stories, the Holy Presence comes to Jacob and wrestled with him – because any relationship worth having is worth wrestling for! I feel it as God saying, "Whatever it takes. I'm in this relationship for the long haul."

When we pray – whatever prayer looks like for you – we respond to that call to relationship with God, the relationship that gives us strength, and grace, and hope. Sometimes prayer can feel like wrestling, and sometimes it can feel like peace.

Whatever it takes. I was so excited when I started seminary. I had rearranged my life and all the pieces had come together like magic – or like the Holy Spirit might have been at work. And then, at the same time I started seminary, my 20-year-old son Patrick got sick. I went to one class in seminary, but Pat really needed me to be with him, and I just stopped going. I stayed with Pat in the hospital, and he was there most of the time, over sixteen months. And people have said to me, "This must have been your time of

closest connection to God. You must have been praying all the time." But I wasn't. I was just taking Pat in. I was focused on him. I didn't have any juice for prayer. I didn't worry that God didn't know that Pat was sick. When I would lay down on that bolster in the hospital room to go to sleep at night, I would just say over and over this line from a hymn that I knew: "Breath of heaven, hold me together." And that was about it. And so all through that time, I just stayed with him. And sixteen months later, Patrick died, and really, so did I. It was October, twelve years ago this month. And then, the following school year rolled around, and I had to decide whether to go to seminary or not. And I will tell you, I didn't feel like it, because when Pat died, I lost all interest in everything. And it was hard enough to get out of bed – I didn't really want to have to go to seminary. But I lived in school housing with my family, and I didn't want to have to find a new apartment MORE than I didn't want to go to seminary. And that is the truth. And so that's why I am a priest today. I started going to seminary, and this shouldn't be a surprise to you, but being in seminary, being among people who were seeking God, where there was a lot of prayer, and a lot going on, I started to be able to breathe again. And this also shouldn't surprise you, but in seminary, a lot of us are there because we're fired up to *serve God*. We're gonna learn a lot, we're gonna go out there, and we're gonna serve God! You just wait, God, we're comin'! Right? There's a lot of that in seminary. But I will tell you, that wasn't *my* experience in seminary. Because I kind of dragged my lifeless self to the endeavor and found that I was coming back to life by being there. I realized that seminary was my soft landing place for this horrible thing that had happened in my life, and that God was saying, "*Go to seminary. You'll like it. Go.*" And God was right. God was drawing me into relationship, and I found

deeper relationship little by little in the being there. That's prayer! God beckons, we respond, and the more we respond, the more God gets deep into our bones, and then, when we need him most, and we're dry of prayer, God is already there.

You can find your voice in the beautiful prayers of the Daily Office and in the Book of Common Prayer, or you can simply cry, "Please, God! Help me!" You can meditate for hours – or take a quiet moment; or you can read and study Scripture – or read a short morning reflection in a booklet like *Forward Day by Day*. It doesn't matter. Being mindful of the presence of God – or crying out for it when we can't seem to find it: all of it is prayer.

The inspiring theologian and author Sister Joan Chittister says: "It is that relationship that counts far beyond any particular devotion."¹

All of it helps us respond to God's loving call to relationship from our end. In a world that can be very hard, where we carry deep grief and deep loss, prayer, praying always, is a gift to us... so that we remember we are loved, that we are worth wrestling for, and that we are not alone – so we don't lose heart.

And so I tell you, from my deepest heart, that second thing that I know, too: God doesn't mind being nagged by us! Don't worry about nagging God. God wants to hear from you, even the same intention over and over again. Be persistent. It's what Jesus tells us to do. When we nag – or pray – persistently, the reality of our relationship with God gets deeper and deeper into our bones. And that reality changes things – so whatever is happening in our lives, we don't lose heart.

I go back to the poet Jane Kenyon, whom I've quoted before, with this most poignant verse:

I am the one whose love
overcomes you, already with you
when you think to call my name. . . .²

So nag away. Pray in your way. Respond. The God who desires relationship with you doesn't mind -- and is already listening.

¹<http://www.joanchittister.org/word-from-joan/10-19-2015/where-god-lives>

²<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49765/briefly-it-enters-and-briefly-speaks>



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