



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION
THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 24C, OCTOBER 16, 2022
JEREMIAH 31:27-34; PSALM 119:97-104; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4"5; LUKE 18:1-8

PRAY ALWAYS

***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?"]*

When I was a child, maybe 6 years old, I remember being in Sunday School and learning how to pray. The teacher showed us how to sit up straight, bow our heads, close our eyes, and hold our hands pressed together, left thumb crossing over right. Then we were ready to say the Lord's Prayer, a Hail Mary, or read a psalm aloud, and God would hear us. As I practiced this, I wanted to get all the steps right so that I could please God and maybe learn to be holy.

As I remember this first introduction to prayer, I'm grateful for the sense of

embodiment, the stillness and humility, and the confident sense that God is near. Those foundational prayers gave me language for praise and thanksgiving and for naming my longings and fears before God.

But it was hard to remember what to do when I wasn't in church and could watch other people. My body was always moving and chattering, and it felt like I had to stop being myself and adopt a different persona in order to approach God. So "praying without ceasing," as Paul tells the Thessalonians, was

impossible, and prayer became something that happened on Sundays and mealtimes, when other people called for it. And God was real, but a silent mystery, at a distance.

This is what I've been thinking about this week as I pondered today's gospel – the parable about a widow and unjust judge that Luke says plainly is about the need to pray always and not lose heart.

In 1st C Palestine, being a widow was about as powerless as you could get. With no husband, property, or name of her own, she is dependent on others to support her. In fact, the base word for “widow,” *chera*, points to deficiency, inadequacy. Given this status, societal norms would expect this woman to accept her vulnerability and her fate, acceding to those in power lest she lose the few relationships she still has.

But this widow doesn't do that. Despite of her deficiency – or maybe because of it – she boldly and persistently demands vindication from the judge. And although he refuses for a time, he eventually relents, because, as today's translation of the gospel says, he doesn't want her bothering him to the point of wearing him out. A closer translation, though, has the judge saying, “I will give her

justice lest she end up doing violence to me, giving me a black eye!” That's a lot more than just annoying him – it sounds like he feels threatened in some way.

So, where is this story about constant prayer and not losing heart? Nowhere in the parable do we see the woman approach the judge with downcast eyes, a soft voice, and clasped hands. Given the way Jesus tells the parable, I imagine her looking the judge straight in the face and shaking her fists at him as she tells how she has been wronged and shouts for justice.

If that's what prayer looks like, then the rule book of my childhood is missing a few chapters. Because if her protest is prayer, then prayer can also be protest. And if her prayer is grounded in the realities and challenges of ordinary life, then that's where we also can find the source and substance of our prayer.

Which means our daily routine of working, caring, and being in relationship is prayer. Doing chores, cooking, and sharing meals, is prayer. Runaway laughter and gawking at beauty is prayer. Cries of grief, frustration, are fear are prayer. And lament for the woundedness of our country, the injustices

heaped on the most vulnerable – that is prayer, too.

All of life can be prayer. When everything we experience or encounter is seen and received in the light of God's presence, power, and grace, we are always praying.

I think the widow knows that. She keeps showing up. And to do that, she must truly trust that her vulnerability and loss are not God's desire for her, but the result of an unfair and greedy system. And because she knows herself as beloved as anyone else -- "chosen," as Jesus says -- she knows no deficiency in herself. She has what she needs to insist on equity from the judge who, let's review, is NOT God.

I wonder if that's what the judge sees. A woman whose clarity, strength, and integrity do not derive from cultural standing, but from her relationship with the One God, who requires justice for all people, especially the vulnerable. That is incorruptible. The judge knows his power, based on fear and coercion of the weak, is no match for that. So, he accedes.

In this parable, the widow is a model of persistence – another word for faithfulness.

She doesn't lose heart in the face of injustice but keeps coming. I wonder about her relationship with God, how she understands the divine. Thinking back again to some of my early learnings about prayer, I'm remembering a sense of God as "out there," at a distance. A God of love, for sure, but remote.

But the widow seems to know something different, the deeper truth. God is not only "out there." God is "in here." We are never separated from the divine; we are bearers of it. We do not find the divine by searching "out there," but by awakening into it, "in here."

That awakening is a lifelong journey of letting go, putting down, and noticing what is.

Letting go of the habits of mind that filter every new experience or person with judgment or comparison to our past experiences or expectations.

Putting down the burden of regarding our own imperfections – and those of others – as inadequacies or deficiencies. And instead, accepting them as particularities, the places we meet God's grace.

Then we are free to notice what is. The interconnectedness of all being, the constant cycle of death and resurrection in creation and in our own lives. The movement of the Spirit drawing us out of ourselves in the name of God's mercy and justice.

As this awakening happens, we become more and more aware of the divine life that dwells

within each of us, and everything we do becomes prayer. Love, grief, service, protest, all of it.

And when everything is prayer, anything is possible.

Amen.



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