

Prayer, Persistence, and Politicians
Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8

In the words of Bible commentator Kimberly Bracken Long, "Just when you think you have Jesus fingered out as a teacher, a healer, and a man of prayer, he goes and tells a story like this." Who knew Jesus was a comedian too? It is not hard to imagine his listeners throwing their heads back and slapping their knees as they laugh at this ridiculous tale. A woman pounds and pounds on the door of a rotten politician. He couldn't care less about her plight, until finally he sticks his head out the window and shouts, "All right, already! Knock it off! I will give you whatever you want if you will just shut up!" They laugh because they know this woman. She always gets a raw deal, because she has nothing - no husband, no inheritance, no social standing. They know this judge too - the one who is only out for himself. No public servant, this one, so they guffaw at the idea of one of their own, this powerless woman, annoying the smarmy guy everyone loves to hate until, finally, he does something good in spite of himself.

Good story, right? They laugh, and then they sigh, and they remember that Jesus told them that this is what prayer is like!

How many of us have been in the position of the persistent widow, hammering away at God's door, praying fervently, but to no apparent avail? The doctor uses the word cancer in the same sentence with your name or the name of loved one, and persistent prayer, prayer without ceasing seems to bring no results, no relief for the fear you feel.

A teenage child experiments with drugs and becomes addicted. You call upon God to rid your beloved child of this life-altering dependency but your child seems lost.

In the wake of yet another natural disaster we pray for relief and comfort until we are worn out from praying. The radio brings news of more war casualties, even though we pray for peace. Is this really the way it is supposed to be? And, is Jesus saying that God is like a rotten politician in this passage from Luke? Is this how God really works? In what way is God like an unjust judge? What hope is Jesus offering?

Indeed, this parable of the widow's persistence is introduced as a parable about prayer and not losing heart, then moves into a story about justice, and ends with a question about faith. However, this parable is not an allegory. The judge is not God. God is not like a crusty old judge who doesn't care. The woman in the parable is a widow. This is noteworthy because a common theme in the Hebrew Bible is the need for people-particularly those in authority-to fulfill God's own purposes by caring for widows and orphans. This theme of care for the widow weaves its way from the beginning to the end of the Old Testament. The specifics of the woman's circumstance do not matter. What matters is that she is among those whom any respectable judge would be seriously obliged to help. But, as we have previously noted, this is no respectable judge. Jesus points out that this judge neither fears God nor has any respect for people. Not even a deserving widow is going to get a good hearing from him.

But, we also note, this is no ordinary widow. This woman is bold and brash, even uppity. She keeps demanding her justice even though her chances of success are little and none, saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." And for a while, the judge refuses. But, finally, he relents, saying, "I have no fear of God. I have no respect for anyone. But, dadgummit, I'm going to do what this woman asks, because she keeps bothering me, and I don't want her to wear me out by continually coming." The Greek word translated "wear me out" literally means to "strike under the eye" or to "give a black eye."

"This woman is going to give me a black eye if I don't give her what she wants," is the judge's way of saying that her unrequited claims for justice are a visible mark to everyone in the community of his failure as a judge. And while the judge doesn't care about anybody else, I can bet you he cares what everybody else thinks about him. And so in order to avoid the black eye, he gives in.

The form of the parable is from lesser to greater, theologian Fred Craddock says. If a judge who does not care will do this for a widow woman, then how much more will God, who loves justice and does care, do for God's people?

So Luke means to say to his church, in danger of becoming disheartened in the face of the delayed promise of Jesus' return, "Don't lose heart. Trust in God. Be confident in God. God is faithful. God will deliver. God will keep God's promise. God is trustworthy. Wait for the Lord. And as you wait, wait trusting, not despairing."

And as the parable addresses itself to prayer the parable teaches us that prayer is work, because our prayers for the things we most deeply need are often met with long periods of silence from God. Fred Craddock writes that prayer is hard work because the human experience is often an experience of waiting in the face of delay. God's timing is almost never our timing.

Craddock tells of a gathering of a group of people concerned with injustice and oppression in our society. An elderly black minister at that gathering read this parable, and in one sentence summarized the whole thing. "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."

Jesus seems to anticipate our dilemma as he instructs the disciples to be more concerned with seeking justice for those on the margins, those who are on the outside, the others in our society and be less concerned about the time when Christ will return. Effectively, Jesus says, "Stop speculating about when I will return and start praying faithfully NOW!" Pray always and do not lose heart. We are reminded that the life of faith is not about telling God what is on our wish list but constantly lifting up every joy and concern, every fear and doubt, every lament and plea to the One who hears and answers. The answer may not come when we think it should; however, it is hard to take the long view when we are praying our hearts out, bruising our hands with our continual pounding on heaven's door.

Jesus' question, "and yet, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth? Is one for us to answer? If the Son of Man is to find faith on earth, we must understand that our persistent prayers do not constitute so many unanswered pleas; rather they are our participation in the coming reign of God. By praying persistently and not giving up hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the Justice and peace that is coming. Our faith is actively hoping, eagerly anticipating, and prayerfully expecting the coming reign of God, never ceasing in our prayers for others, for the world, even for ourselves.