

Pray Without Ceasing

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Luke 18:1-8

As we continue to get to know one another, allow me to share two family stories.

When I was in eighth grade (I remember the day vividly), I came home from school to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table. My father had been in a very serious car accident, she told me. He and two of his colleagues were driving from Columbus to Cleveland to attend the funeral of the father of another colleague, and the car hit a very small and unseasonable patch of ice and spun out, hitting a tree. The driver, my dad's close friend and colleague, was killed instantly. Another passenger, sitting in the back seat, was tossed around a bit. My dad was somewhere in the middle, experiencing a traumatic brain injury, along with significant cuts and broken ribs. He was hospitalized for nearly a month and then convalesced for weeks more. There are many trajectories to the story, but this morning I remember the prayers that were raised for him all across the church. Decades later, as we were cleaning out boxes of papers, I discovered card after card and letter after letter, with prayers for my dad.

Nearly 27 years ago, our son, Kenneth, decided to arrive early, some eight weeks early. Again, there are many trajectories to the story, and those of you who met him in June know that he turned out pretty well, if I do say so myself. Eight weeks in NICU were challenging, for him, we presume, and for us. And again, what we knew is that people across the church, across the country, were praying for him, for us. We still have many of the cards and letters. We even have a cassette tape – remember those? – of a church service and people praying for him.

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This is profound territory, for any of us, ourselves, family, beloved ones, who have faced such hardships. And it is profound territory for any of us who have offered up prayers for those facing them. You know how profound, and how complex, and how mysterious, and how sacred, this can be.

My dad got better, over the long haul. Our son grew and gained strength and now runs marathons. But some in such accidents don't get better. Some babies don't grow. Bad things *do* happen to people, good or otherwise. And it's difficult for me to think, as one who believes fiercely in God and who prays for all sorts of things, that anything about the quality of the prayers, or the character of those who offer them, or – and this is the point as its essence – the God who hears them – has anything to do with an outcome, good or bad. Yet I believe in God, and I still believe in prayer, and I believe that it matters.

We pray in worship – several kinds of prayers, actually. I learned this in seminary – ACTS – four kinds of prayers offered in Sunday worship. ACTS – *adoration*, praising God simply for being God; *confession*, sharing our sins and shortcomings with God; *thanksgiving*, thanking God for every good gift in our life; *supplication*, lifting up our deep concerns for others and the world. All four should be present in some way in worship each Sunday. The writer Anne Lamott once shared that there are really only two prayers, “please” and “thank you.” That works as well. Please and thank you.

But we are focused primarily on the *S*, the last one, supplication, where we –as the old gospel hymn says – take it to the Lord in prayer, whether for ourselves, for our loved ones, or for the world. It’s a kind of dance we do, lifting up those things to God about which we are deeply concerned, not thinking we can change God’s mind, necessarily, but hoping that the effort will somehow make a difference. Because we know that while some will die from cancer, some will experience remission. We know that while for some addiction will maintain its strong grip, others will experience recovery.

Jesus told a parable about this, which takes us in an unexpected direction and tells us, perhaps, as much about ourselves as God.

He told his followers a parable, we are told, about “their need to pray always and not to lost heart.” Pray always – don’t lose heart. While we don’t know exactly what’s coming, do we expect this? Do we expect the story of a widow who takes on an unjust judge, who persists with unflagging persistence, until she changes the judge’s mind and experiences justice?

This is a parable and not a news story, and we wonder so much. Who was this judge and what was his problem? Who was this woman, this unnamed widow, and what injustice had been done to her? What was the nature of the case itself? But mostly, we want to know why, and how, she persisted so passionately, in the face of a man and a system who repeatedly said no.

Because it’s a parable, we can certainly extrapolate, or at least I can. I do so with some trepidation, because I know there are some lawyers in the house this morning. One extrapolation is about something called “The Innocence Project,” and efforts like it, working to free people, often men of color, from imprisonment, using new techniques to overturn rulings that were delivered unjustly. The parable tells us that the woman kept coming to the judge, persistently, nagging, as someone said this week, nagging, unrelentingly, until the judge finally changes his mind. “I will grant her justice,” he says, “so that she may not wear me out.”

That is funny to me – what parent has not relented in the face of a child’s persistent nagging?

But it’s more than nagging, much more. Many of Jesus’ parables equate the authority figure with God, a judge, a king, a rich landowner. I am not so sure here – this judge is mean and unjust and seemingly arbitrary. I am not sure what we can learn about God here.

But we can learn plenty about ourselves. Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, writes that “...I marvel at the widows of the world, the women like that woman...who refuse to give up

on justice, no matter how often, or how violently, or how utterly injustice apparently wins. Their persistence belies all logic. Their tenacity humbles people like me who've given up when faced with fewer and lesser odds."

Jill continues: "Her persistence humbled me, but her hope, her faith, they inspired me. Persistence cannot be uncoupled from a stalwart sense of purpose and a hope that others may see as irrational."

So is this a parable about prayer, as it says, OR, is it a parable about something else, something more, something deeper? Meda Stamper writes that "The 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."

Somehow they seem interrelated to me – prayer, justice, faith. Recently – in the face of mass shooting after mass shooting – there has been a kind of social media backlash against the phrase "thoughts and prayers," as if "thoughts and prayers" were a kind of numbing agent leading to cultural shoulder-shrugging and passive inaction. For we who are people of faith, who believe in prayer and so much more, the phrase really needs to be "thoughts and prayers and action." Prayer, for us, leads to action. Without action, prayer rings hollow. And without prayer, action has an unstable foundation.

That can be hard for us. Sharron Blezard writes that "I grew up in a culture where it was considered poor form and impolite to be a bother or to pester someone." We look at the persistent widow as a nag, obnoxious, a pest. But here Jesus is, holding her up as a prime exemplar of faith, unwilling to accept injustice.

What would that look like for us? I do believe we continue to pray for those we care about – the list is long and the challenges are real. Grief. Cancer. Dementia. Addiction. Depression. We pray and we pray and we hope – we are people of hope – we hope that by God's grace some form of healing can happen, whatever healing might look like in God's mercy. And even when the outcome is different than what we'd imagine, that praying itself brings us closer to those we love, closer to our own souls and certainly closer to God.

But there remains that widow's witness, the kind of prayerful persistence that serves as a model for us all.

We've spent the last couple of second hours looking at something called the Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith. It includes this phrase – "*in a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing.*" In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to prayer without ceasing. Courage. Prayer without ceasing. It's a reference from I Thessalonians, and it easily could serve as the tagline for this extraordinary parable.

So pray *all* the prayers – adore, confess, give thanks, lift up others and the world. Say please and say thank you. And find the courage – in your own spirit and as a gift *from* the Spirit – to move from prayer to action, from piety to justice, from spirituality to social witness, in part because a very long time ago Jesus told a story that places that call at the heart of our faith, a story of a heroic woman who would not take injustice for an answer. Amen.