

Sermon – October 17, 2010

Scripture: Luke 18: 1-8 & Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly. Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But the one who wins with heaven is the one who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might. Charles H. Spurgeon

Prayer is scary business for some of us! When we pray we open ourselves up to a personal relationship with God. When we pray we put all our beliefs on the line. If our prayers are answered – we feel affirmed in our beliefs. But what if our prayers are not answered? What do we do with that? Do we blame ourselves? Maybe that wasn't a good prayer, maybe I'm not a good enough person... Or do we blame God?

So lots of people don't pray at all – it's not so risky that way. Or maybe we only pray when it's **really** important. I've heard that called "the 911 prayer" – or the "oh boy I'm really in trouble" prayer.

Some of us know we should pray, but we really don't know what to say. Lots of us say the Lord's Prayer every day – and that's it. If we say it with heart and feeling, then that's a good start. If we rattle it off without even thinking about the words – then maybe it's not so good. It's kind of like if you tell your partner you love them without lifting your eyes off the morning paper!

In our gospel reading from Luke this morning, Jesus tells a parable, a story, about the disciples need to pray always and not to lose heart. The story is about an evil judge and a widow. These two people

represent both ends of the social spectrum of that community. The judge is the epitome of power. There is no jury. There is no appeal court. He has all the power to interpret and apply the law for the citizens. We know he is evil because he had no fear of God, and no respect for anyone. Now in a shame-pride culture such as this was in Jesus' day, this man could be said to "have no shame" – his inner sense of what constitutes a good act is missing. So he can't be shamed into appropriate social behavior. In our times we might call him a sociopath.

The widow represents the other end of the spectrum. In those days the widow had no right to the estate of her husband. She was left penniless and totally at the mercy of the compassion of others. She was extremely vulnerable. In the bible there are many references to the need to care for orphans and widows.

The widow had no rights, but she had the power of scripture and natural justice behind her, and she was very persistent – what we might call a "feisty" woman for her time. She didn't give up – she kept coming back.

For awhile the judge refused her pleas. Maybe he expected a bribe. Maybe he just found her annoying. In any case he ignored her – for awhile. But in the end he gave in to her demands, not because it was the right thing to do – but because he found her tiresome, and maybe even because she did have justice on her side, and he might be seen to be not doing his job. This might give him a "black eye" in the community – and he might even lose his nice job.

So, **if**, for all the wrong reasons this judge grants justice to the widow, Jesus asks: "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who

cry to him day and night?” Jesus tells this story to help his disciples to see the power of persistent prayer.

But, we might say, why do we have to “nag” at God with our prayers? Why isn’t one good prayer enough? It sort of reminds me of the popular saying: “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”. Imagine if all prayers were answered instantaneously. My mother used to say to me, “Karen, be careful what you pray for – you just might get it!” Sometimes we pray without really thinking it through. What we just prayed for might not be really good for us – or for someone else. So when we pray persistently, intentionally, and considerately, we have a chance to fine tune our prayers – or even re-consider them altogether!

Also, if we think about it, persistent prayer means continuous communication with God. We are opening up a channel of communication – a hot line – to God. Once we do that we have established two-way communication – we will be opening ourselves to God’s influence in our lives in ways we maybe didn’t expect. We will be clearing clogged channels so that we can better receive God’s mercies.

Our reading from the prophet Jeremiah this morning speaks to this issue. In this reading, the Lord speaks of the New Covenant to come when we will know God in our hearts, and will not need to learn about the will of God from anyone else. As we open our hearts to God in prayer, God is with us – the power and wisdom and compassion of God are made available to each of us. The New Covenant written in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is ours today.

We are assured that God will grant justice to those who pray persistently. But we must pray from the depths of the heart, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane – so earnestly that great drops of

sweat like blood fell from his brow. Even so – the cup of suffering was not removed from Jesus – but was redeemed – transformed into something greater by the power of God.

We cannot know how or when God will answer our prayers. Our faith may be sorely tested as we continue to pray in the face of desolation and injustice. But our faith will also be increased and strengthened as we continue this practice. Martin Luther said, “Prayer is the most important thing in my life. If I should neglect prayer for a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith.”

What about praying for others? Is this a good idea? To the extent that it connects us to the suffering and the needs of other people, and if it doesn't replace the actual helping and comforting of our neighbours, then private prayer for others can almost certainly do no harm. But Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once told the New York State legislature: “I'm not going to pray for you. There are certain things a man does for himself. He has to blow his own nose, make his own love and say his own prayers.”

So pray always and don't lose heart. The prayers of the faithful are music to the Holy One. Our prayer lives are living channels for the love of God to enter into the world. So pray for a better world. Pray for peace and justice in the world. Pray for more tolerance and less fanaticism in society. Pray that Christ will return and bring to fruition God's dream for the world. Make up your own prayers!

We who live in Christ, and in whom Christ lives – we are now the Light of the World. Our prayers bring more and more light into God's world – and that is part of God's plan. Pray without ceasing, and never lose hope – till Christ shall come again. Amen.