



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Praying Without Losing Heart

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

October 17, 2010

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

Luke 18:1-8

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Then Jesus told them 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?"

Not long after Alayne and I moved into our neighborhood in Tennessee, the neighbors on both sides of us put their houses on the market. One afternoon I stood outside talking with one of my neighbors about their upcoming move and, motioning to the house on the other side of ours, I said, "You know, with you and the other family moving, Alayne and I have wondered if we did anything to run off all our neighbors."

I was joking. Her response to my seemingly obvious joke has troubled me a bit. "No, I don't *think* that's it," she said. She managed a bit of a chuckle, but I was left to wonder. She left a bit too much wiggle-room in that *think* of hers. Why were both families moving?

The first family who lived in one house next door to us decided to move because they needed more space. That, I understand.

The neighbors in the other house next door to us moved away quickly, leaving behind an unsold house still filled with their furniture and most of their belongings. They moved because they sensed through prayer that God was telling them to move. That, I don't understand.

As I've reflected on their prayer-inspired move over the years, I have discovered that there's a lot about prayer that I simply don't understand. Of all the things a pastor ought to have a grasp on, it's prayer, but I find myself constantly asking of God what the disciples once asked—"Lord, teach me how to pray." I used to think I was alone in that

struggle, and I kept my fears about prayer to myself. But it finally dawned on me that others struggle with prayer too. Perhaps you understand.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told his disciples a parable because they were having problems with prayer. Now there are some people who will tell you that problem with prayer is a fairly new thing, and that it only occurs among non-religious people, but Jesus knew better. We all have problems with prayer. Even Jesus' closest disciples were having problems with prayer. That's why Jesus told them this parable.

We have many questions and issues and problems about prayer. Mainly we wonder if prayer is really heard by God. So many of our prayers seem unanswered. We pray for someone to change, but they don't change a bit, at least in the way we think they should. We pray for peace, but the troops aren't home and the war rages. We pray for our children, but they still get into deep trouble.

We have problems with prayer, but when we go all the way down, our deepest problem with prayer is that we lose heart. We just lose heart. We lose confidence and trust and hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. We lose heart. Can you imagine over the course of the past two months how many prayers people offered for the miners? And don't you know that as the days marched on, that children praying for their fathers to make it out, wives praying for their husbands to be rescued, it would have been easy to lose heart?

And Jesus told them a parable that they might pray always and not lose heart.

The story that Jesus told his disciples was about an absolutely horrible judge. This judge hated people and he hated God. He didn't go to church and he refused to give to charity. Someone described him perfectly when they said, "He's the kind of corrupt judge who makes a mockery out the title 'Your Honor.'"

Unfortunately, appearing in his courtroom was a poor widow who needed justice but had nothing. She had absolutely nothing. She had no money, she had no husband, she had no standing, she had no power, she had nor resources, she had nothing. She was so insignificant, she probably couldn't have gotten justice in a good courtroom with a good judge, but here she was in the courtroom of the worst judge in the land.

Now, did I say that she had nothing? That's not quite true. She did have one thing. She had the capacity to be a pest, to annoy. And, when you only have one weapon, you use it. So she annoyed this judge constantly. She shouted aloud for justice in his courtroom: "Give me justice! Give me justice!" She knocked on his chamber doors; she sent him at least a million messages by email. She posted a video on You Tube and changed her Facebook status, all with the repeated refrain, "Give me justice! Give me justice! Give me justice!"

Finally, she wore the old judge down. The judge said to himself, "You know, I don't care about justice. I don't care about this widow, I don't like people, I don't like God and I don't care about anybody. But this woman is about to drive me crazy! I'm going to give her what she wants just to get her off my back."

And that's the story that Jesus told us that we might pray always and not lose heart. Now, what are we supposed to get out of that story that will help us pray always and not lose heart?

Luke's gospel is written to a church facing the reality that they were praying, but they were losing heart. They were a community deeply invested in prayer for the fulfillment of God's kingdom, but when they looked around, it didn't seem as if God was listening to their prayers. They were becoming discouraged and were losing heart. Luke was writing to a church that was praying, but who was beginning to wonder if their prayers mattered at all.

That happens to us, doesn't it? We pray to God, not even sure what words to use, not sure if we're being heard at all, and, when things we pray for don't happen, it's easy to lose heart. And so we start praying less, until we finally stop praying at all. It's the old "I won't be disappointed if I don't ask for anything" routine.

We pray, but too soon we lose heart.

Against the backdrop of scripture, Jesus encourages the church again and again to pray. In spite of our confusion, in spite of our doubts about what it does, no matter that evidence around us often suggests that our prayers aren't being heard at all. Persevere in prayer, says Jesus, and the church has tried to do that ever since.

Admittedly, it's difficult to persevere in prayer for wholeness when there's so much brokenness. It's hard to persevere in prayer for peace when the world is at war. It's hard to persevere in prayer when it seems as if our prayers for God's kingdom to come in its fullness go unheeded. It's hard to persevere in prayer and too soon we lose heart.

Jesus' parable about the woman persevering in her requests to the judge are yet another time when Jesus tells us that we should pray, and that we shouldn't lose heart.

So, what will keep us from losing heart? Not easy evidence that what we pray for happens. No, we will *not* lose heart in our prayer when we discover again and again that what we truly seek in answer to our prayers is God. In prayer we are seeking after the heart of God and seeking to live our lives in response to who God is.

Samuel Weber is a Catholic priest who once taught a course on prayer that I attended. It was a J-Term class at Louisville Seminary, which meant it was only three weeks. And just about every day, Brother Sam would enter the room and either write on the chalkboard or proclaim to us: "Pray as you can, not as you can't." It was his way of saying that the number of answers to the question of how to pray may be equal to the number of people who are asked. The important thing, in other words, is that you pray at all.

I used to teach a class on the principles of Christian worship through a seminary extension program each summer. One year, we were waiting for Rachel to be born, so I began with an explanation of why I had a cell phone with me. I told them that we were waiting for the birth of a child. To me, it was nothing but a moment of practical explanation.

During the first break, however, one of my students came up to me and said: "I know I don't know you too well. This may not be appropriate. But I want to pray for you and your wife." And he did. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he prayed a prayer asking for God's sustaining presence and blessing. It was in many ways a remarkable moment. I thought to myself: "I wouldn't have done this." I would never have dared such a boldly intimate move. And then I heard Brother Sam's words: "Pray as you can, not as you

can't."

I remember visiting an older church member in the hospital in Nashville. While we talked, he told me about something that had happened earlier that morning. One of the children of that congregation who was now an adult and worked at that hospital had stopped to visit him. Tears welled up in his eyes and he said: "Tip prayed the most wonderful prayer. It was a special moment."

I thought to myself as I began to pray with him, "You know, all that's needed here is an *amen* to Tip's prayer."

It was a transforming moment for my ministry, and for the person Tip had visited. Pictured before me was the very essence of what we in the church talk about all the time. Tip was living out the priesthood of all believers, pouring out his heart in prayer for someone he loved. I have no idea what he prayed. I don't know if he got all the theology just right. But I know this: His prayer mattered.

And so do yours. They matter to you. They matter to the broader world, and they matter to God. While I confess openly to my own struggles with prayer, I unquestionably hold up for you and for me the biblical posture of Jesus who in all times and in all places seems to be praying to God. And this praying Jesus invites—even commands—us to do the same.

The gospels seem to be saying time and time again: "Don't wait until you understand it; just pray."

"Don't wait until you have everything neatly pinned down; just pray."

"Don't wait until you've let go of your anger at God because it seems to you like God doesn't care; just pray."

"Don't worry so much about your language of prayer that you forget the act of prayer."

"Don't worry that your prayers won't sound religious enough or pretty enough or passionate enough; just pray!"

Standing in the face of biblical prayer and our questions about prayer, it seems pretty clear: Prayer is a mystery. And, as with all mysteries, they lose something if we try to pin it down to carefully.

So, we ask along with the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus, true to form, refuses to give us an answer. Do you remember what he did instead? He gave us a model, The Lord's Prayer, we call it. And, when all else fails, when you can think of no other words with which to pray, those words are there for your use.

But they also send you to other words and other thoughts that you are more than welcome to pray. For, if the scriptures tell us anything at all about prayer, it's this: In the act of prayer itself, you have already received that which you truly seek, which is communion with God.

How then should you pray? I can't answer that for you. I'm not even sure I can answer it for myself beyond the moment I'm in. Perhaps the answer will come as we pray together. Because, answers or not, right thinking or not, I will continue to pray. Not because I've got it right, but because Jesus did and told me to.