

FINDING FAITH ON EARTH

Okay, let me say to you right up front that the parable of the persistent widow baffles me. It raises more questions than it answers, because it seems to describe a method of praying that seems foolhardy at best, and downright dangerous at worst.

Ask yourself, is the widow in Jesus' parable supposed to be an example for us of how to pray? Is Jesus really teaching us to pester God in prayer the way the widow pesters the judge? Is the objective of prayer to be as stubborn, tenacious and unrelenting as we possibly can in our prayers, in an attempt to wear God down? Is our praying supposed to be so insistent, maybe even to the point of worrying God that we may become violent and attack Him, that God has no choice but to give in to our demands?

That would be prayer by temper tantrum. It would be having a hissy fit prayer. It's "stomp your feet on the ground, hold your breath until your face turns red, God you're really going to regret it if you don't give in to me" prayer. The persistent widow's style of praying is in the style of Don Corleone in *The Godfather*. "God, I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse." It's prayer by ultimatum, in which God responds to us not because God loves us, but because God just wants us to shut up.

Has anyone here ever actually prayed to God like that?

This parable seems to work negatively. It demonstrates God's character and nature by way of contrast. The whole point is that God isn't like the unjust judge, but is instead a just and loving God who doesn't delay when the "chosen ones" cry out, and not only grants them justice, but grants it quickly.

The problem with that understanding of Jesus' story is that too often, reality and our lived experience doesn't bear that out. Too often in life, God does delay, and justice is nowhere to be found. Too often, our most fervent prayers—for healing, for justice, for peace, for joy—seem to go unanswered. Too often, our experiences with prayer can lead us to perceive God as an unjust judge, who ignores and turns away from the urgency of our requests for reasons we can't really begin to understand.

I wonder if this parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge actually isn't about God at all. I wonder if, instead, it's about us, about the condition of our hearts and the motivations behind our prayers. Maybe what's at stake isn't who God is and how God operates in the world and answers prayer, but who we are, and how we might strengthen and grow our spiritual lives through prayer.

Luke introduces the parable with a one-line opening: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." A few verses later, at the end of the parable, Jesus concluded the story with a zinger of a question: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" So perhaps what the parable is doing is offering an illustration of two things: how not to lose heart, and what faith—the kind of faith the Son of Man hopes and yearns to find on earth—might look like.

What does it mean to "lose heart?"

The words that come to my mind include weariness, resignation, sorrow and despair. When I lose heart, I lose my sense of focus, direction and purpose in life. My soul's GPS goes haywire and is desperately trying to "recalculate," the murky, gray world and find the right direction to go in, because as singer-songwriter Paul Simon once said, "Everywhere I go is nowhere I want to be."

In sharp contrast to that, the widow in Jesus' parable is the very picture of purposefulness and intention. She knows her need, she knows her urgency, and she knows exactly where to go and who to ask in order to get her need met. If nothing else, the daily business of getting up, getting dressed, heading over to the judge's house or the courtroom, banging on his door, and talking his ear off until he listens and responds clarifies the widow's own sense of who she is and what she's about.

No, there's nothing vague or wishy-washy about this bold, plucky woman in Jesus' parable. She lives in bright, vivid Technicolor, here, now, today, and she tells the judge in no uncertain terms, repeatedly and persistently, "Give me justice! I will not shut up or stop bothering you until you do!"

So, maybe one of the points of the parable isn't so much how we pray, but the drive and determination behind our prayers.

What is prayer for? What happens when we pray?

I can only speak from experience, but I know that when I persist in prayer—I mean really persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time—something happens to me. My sense of who I am, to whom I belong, what really matters in life and why I exist—those things mature and become more evident. My heart

grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and inconsistent. And sometimes—here’s the surprise—these good things happen even when I don’t receive the answer I’m praying for.

To be clear, I’m not saying that unanswered prayer doesn’t take a toll. It can hurt and baffle and frustrate me. It can anger me. And it can even break my heart. But maybe that’s the point of this parable, too: the work of prayer is hard. It demands significant time, effort and resilience: the kind of time, effort and resilience that widow put into her repeated petitions to the unjust judge.

That widow had to make a costly choice every day.

Will I keep asking?

Do I dare risk humiliation and rejection one more time?

Do I still believe that my request is worthy of continued perseverance?

Can I be patient, and let God be God?

Do I have faith that, in the end, if I keep at it, the justice I seek will be bestowed on me by the judge?

Those are the kinds of questions we have to ask and decisions we need to make every time we fall to our knees and address Almighty God. And there’s no guarantee that we have the right answers to those questions. All we really have, whenever we take a risk and pray to God, is our faith.

Faith that God is listening and hears our prayer.

Faith that God answers prayer in some way, shape or form.

Faith that God wants what’s best for us.

Faith that ours is a loving God.

And faith that God’s love is for all people. Even for us.

In the end, my friends, prayer is a great mystery. We can’t know—it’s not given to us to know—why some prayers are answered quickly and why many others aren’t. We may struggle to understand, but in the end it’s not ours to understand why our earnest pleas for healing or peace or justice hit the wall of God’s silence and sometimes remain there for weeks, months, years, or lifetimes. It’s only ours to continue praying with all our might and never give up.

The reason that we can be persistent in prayer is because of who we’re addressing. Our persistence will never be in vain, because it’s directed to the Lord, the One who made heaven and earth. The God we address in prayer is our powerful and unrelentingly loving keeper, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who watches over our coming and goings and guards our days and nights.

I will end my message this morning with a prayer written by the Catholic priest and mystic Thomas Merton.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I’m going. I do not see the road ahead

of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself; and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

If we could pray like that on a persistent basis and never give up, keeping our focus and attention on who God is and who we’re addressing in prayer, then our prayers will truly transform our hearts and minds. And when the Son of Man comes, returning for us at last, he will find faith on the earth—and in us. Amen.