

“God the Widow”

A Sermon Based on Luke 18:1-8
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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I know of no one who would say that the Apostle Paul was anything other than a man of prayer. He is the one who wrote to the Thessalonians, “...pray without ceasing...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (I Thess. 5:17&18)

We usually wonder, “How in the world can someone, anyone pray without ceasing?” But rarely do we think that Paul was merely overstating his point, that this admonition is an example of hyperbole. Rightly do we believe that Paul meant exactly what he wrote.

So, how do we do that? Well, one interesting answer can be found in a little book called *The Way of the Pilgrim* written by an anonymous Russian Orthodox person. This book advocates the use of the Jesus Prayer, which runs, “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” The pilgrim begins by saying it slowly, meditating upon each word, then each phrase, then all of it.

Once the pilgrim begins to appreciate the power of the prayer, it is repeated more and more often, throughout the day. The writer advises that the pilgrim recite the prayer in accord with his breathing, saying, “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God,” when inhaling, and “have mercy upon me, a sinner,” when exhaling. That should get you up to several hundred repetitions, maybe even more than a thousand each day.

Once that is mastered so that the recitation of the prayer becomes subconscious, the pilgrim is advised to begin reciting the prayer in accord with the heartbeat. That should move the pilgrim to the point of repeating the prayer several thousand times a day. In fact, the pilgrim is advised to strive for 12,000 times each day. When that point is reached, the prayer will be part of the person just as the heartbeat is part of the person. It will be internalized. It will be unceasing.

Now, we don't know if Paul prayed in this way. But we feel reasonably certain that if anyone could pray in such a way, Paul could.

Certainly, any person who can pray without ceasing will be a giant of the faith. Such a person will be righteous, and James wrote that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Yet, as we say all of this, a suspicion nags us. "What about the times when prayers are unanswered?" Even Paul told the Corinthians of a time when he prayed and prayed and prayed and still that for which he prayed did not happen. You can find his account of that time in the second letter to the Corinthians.

What he received from God instead was wisdom and strength. He wrote that God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And he added, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Do you find comfort or strength in that? Perhaps. But if you do, I bet you are a giant of prayer like Paul, for this wisdom he was given by God was hard won. Such wisdom, and the comfort that comes with it, does not come easily. More typically, we feel like Wordsworth who wrote, "...whence can comfort spring when prayer is of no avail?"

Sometimes we do pray for something and we don't get it. Sometimes we pray for someone else, and nothing seems to happen. The standard answer given is that God said, "No." So often that response is followed with a citation of this parable of Jesus along with the advice that we should assault heaven with our prayers. One of the ancient mystics characterized such praying as, "Battering the gates of heaven with storms of prayer."

"Does your prayer seem unanswered? Pray with more energy. Pray more earnestly. And don't give up."

II

We all know when typically we pray. We typically pray when life throws us a curve. We pray when we are hurting or when someone we love is hurting. We

pray when we need something, and we pray the more earnestly the greater our need. We pray when we are desperate.

When do we not pray? When all is well, of course. And that is strange, if you pause to think about it. For what is prayer? Prayer is communication. In all of our other relationships, the close ones especially, when all is well, we talk with one another most freely. It is when things are not good for us that we withdraw. Yet our communication with God, our praying, seems to work in exactly the opposite way.

Luke writes that the parable that Jesus tells in this passage is about prayer. It is about praying always and continually and not losing heart. Traditionally, the parable is interpreted with the widow representing those who are oppressed and who seek justice and with the Judge representing God. That is one way to read this.

This morning I want to suggest another way of reading it that works. What if, in this parable, Jesus is trying to tell us that God is the widow and that we are the judge? Megan McKenna, in her book *Parables*, suggests just this reading. It is an insight she gained from a poor woman in Chiapas, Mexico.

McKenna was in Chiapas leading a study on this very passage, when the woman stood up to address the group. She said that she was a widow, and she spoke of going to a judge, like the one in the parable, and pleading for her rights. She wanted to know why her son had been arrested and taken away, and why, weeks later, she still could not find out where he was. She said she hounded the judge day and night. She watched him, where he went, what he did, who he saw. She had nothing to lose. She had already lost her husband, as well as her other children. She was desperate.

She said she grew to hate the judge, and all who were connected with the military, the jail and the courts. She said she prayed to God the same way while she pleaded and begged and became angry with the judge.

Then she said that as she listened to the parable that day, she realized that she was the judge and that God was the widow. We are the ones, she said, who only get persistent and long-suffering when we want something, when we

are desperate. Typically we are not long-suffering and persistent when all is well. It is God who is always in our face, begging, pleading, cajoling, hounding us to do justice, to pray, to adore him alone and to respond as we should. God is the widow crying out for justice to us.

Is that not true, she asked. God has nothing left to lose. God has lost everything trying to call us back to repentance, forgiveness, justice, peace, mercy and living with one another as we should, obeying God's way.

What if Jesus is trying to tell us that God is the widow? Is such a notion farfetched? I don't think so, for who are widows? In the day of Jesus, widows were often unemployable. They were oppressed by laws. They were perceived as useless, unprofitable, forgettable, lost. They were considered a burden to their families. They would have been included among those Jesus called "the least of these."

Is that not who God was in the Incarnation? He came among us as a vulnerable, weak baby, born of a poor, scandalized, young woman, in a backwater country of a conquered people. He came among us not in power and glory, but as one of the least of these. And Jesus taught in his ministry that his kingdom would be one of love, one that is realized through conversion and not through violence or force or conquest.

So it makes perfect sense that God is the widow in the parable. God is always after us to fulfill our callings as disciples. Never will God force us to do that which we are called to do.

III

I love this reading because it serves as a corrective to the arrogant, unwarranted self-confidence of our age. Our age is unlike any other in that so many feel perfectly at ease placing God in the witness stand and asking God to justify Godself. "Why do you allow such evil and violence and oppression."

Ours is the only age in history which looks around at the pain and suffering of our world and then places the blame not on ourselves as the authors of that pain and suffering, but on God for seeming to have failed to prevent it.

This reading of this parable gives a better sense of reality. God is after us, like the widow, to do what is right.

Where is the hope in this reading of the parable? In this: God doesn't lose heart. God does not give up on us. Scripture tells us that from the beginning God has been acting in creative, imaginative ways to respond to our self-destructive ways, our refusals to do what is right, our willful ignorance and our stubbornness and sin.

God keeps coming after us, and Jesus seems to be saying that God won't stop coming after us, until justice is done, until we know who we are, who God is, who our neighbor is until we do the three things Micah said we ought to do: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Is that not Good News, that God is after us, and won't give up? Is that not what Jesus taught, that God seeks out the lost, to find and heal what is hurt and broken, to raise up the poor and the oppressed, the least among these?

That is what we know as unconditional love. As McKenna writes, "Unconditional love is not so much what we get on our end of the relationship, but the price and the depth of what is given on the other end of the relationship and the length others will go to evoke love from those who keep refusing to accept it."

The call comes in our response. If we accept such unconditional love, then we must start living, loving, praying and struggling for justice in the very way God does, without losing heart.

Do you want to pray without ceasing? Then try to understand how God has been after you without ceasing, calling you, wooing you, demanding from you that you be who God created you to be.

The prayer called for in this parable, then, is not prayer that seeks to take something from God. It is a prayer for God to take something from us and give it to whom it rightly belongs in justice. It is when God gets through to us that we judges given in and allow justice to be realized.

And you know, even if we give in for the wrong reasons, at first, like the judge who only wanted to be rid of the widow, then that is a good beginning. It is

enough. But don't think that will be the end of the matter. The widow is not going to be gotten rid of. Not before justice rolls down like an ever flowing stream.

Does it not seem wiser, then, to just give in, to yield to God, to become the friend of the Widow? In the last few years, there seems to be a great hunger for spirituality. What Jesus says in this parable to all who are seekers is this: Stop running away! So may it be. Amen.