

Luke 18:1-8

While in seminary, I had a spiritual director who always ended our sessions together with the same question: How is your prayer life? I really came to dread her asking me that question. She and I both knew that answer was never quite as good as I wanted it to be. I would feel no small amount of shame as I told her about my prayer habits, which were sometimes haphazard, sometimes halfhearted, sometimes clumsy. I was fully aware that I wanted my prayer life to be more faithful and fulfilling, but even as we talked through topics and strategies that might aid me in my quest to connect with God in deeper, richer ways, I often found myself slipping unintentionally into the habits I had picked up over the course of my life, habits like falling asleep right in the middle of my prayers at bedtime at the end of a long day, or treating God like a genie and giving my long wi\$h li\$t of things and people I wanted to pray for.

I went to spiritual direction about once a month, so after seven or eight times hearing that same question, it started to get to me. “How is your prayer life,” she would ask expectantly and with an air of genuine curiosity, as if she didn’t know I was about to give the same excuses she’d already heard from me for more than half a year. How is your prayer life? How is your prayer life? How is your prayer life? I felt like I was going through some wrapped version of the five stages of grief as I answered her question month after month: denial, anger, sadness, defensiveness. After no small amount of consternation and frustration, after months of hearing that infernal question, I finally started to come around to acceptance and owned up to it: my prayer life wasn’t where I want it to be, and I wanted it to be better. I remember her smiling when I finally got around to saying that truth out loud, and she told me, in all her gentle wisdom,

that God might finally be able to get some work done here, now that we were finally done with pretenses and excuses, finally ready to get to work.

It was a meaningful moment for me, and with the help of my spiritual director, that season of exploration and growth unlocked a whole world of prayer practices and experiences. Looking back on that frustrating and fruitful season, I find myself extraordinarily thankful for her persistence. She, perhaps very much with the help of the Holy Spirit, saw that I was struggling with prayer. And instead of accepting my protestations that everything was “fine,” she helped me shrug off my own indifference, inability, and intransigence, and invited me to explore what prayer can and should be like: an ongoing conversation with God in which we work with God to discern and then align ourselves with God’s will. My own adventures with prayer have not always been linear, and I’ll be the first to admit I still sometimes find myself falling asleep in the middle of my prayers at the end of a long day. The key is that we keep trying, keep striving, and know that God is with us and for us always, inviting us into deeper, more meaningful conversation, speaking to us always, and giving us gifts and talents that help us listen and hear and, hopefully, act.

Today’s Gospel reading is a parable about prayer. In it, Jesus tells the story of two people, a persistent widow and a judge. We don’t know what the widow is asking for, and we don’t know why the judge, at least at first, resists her requests. What we do know is that through sheer persistence, the widow convinces that judge to give her the justice she seeks. Often, when we read parables, we look for who God is in the story and who we are, as well. But this parable can’t be read like that. Instead, it works by highlighting just how different God is from the people in the parable by providing us an example of human machinations. This judge is unjust, even by his

own admission. He has no respect for God. He has not respect for anyone, he helpfully tells us in his internal monologue, not God and certainly not for a lowly widow. Yet even he can be pushed into relenting and providing justice through the persistence and constant badgering of the widow. This parable works like an if, then statement: if this unjust judge can somehow be persuading, even begrudgingly, to provide justice, then won't God, who we know is just and who does care about people, *especially* the lowly, also provide justice when called upon? The parable's natural conclusion is yes, of course, we can count upon the God of compassion to be compassionate. We can count on the God of love to be loving. We can count on the God of justice to make the world just in the end.

This parable calls our attention to some universal truths about prayer. One is that a life of prayer should be persistent, a constant, ongoing conversation with God, not because we have to badger God into listening to us, but because we love God, and even more importantly, God loves us and wants to be in relationship and in communication with us. Paul tells us in his letter to the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing. In that vein, prayer becomes akin to breathing, or perhaps like our own heartbeat, something happening in and around us, that sustains us, that becomes so second nature that we don't have to think about it, a rhythm and a pattern in which we naturally and instinctively live. If that sounds daunting and not at all like your own prayer life, don't worry. I'm also not there. But it does help to know what the goal might look like.

Persistence is key also in the face of the many difficult things we go through in life. Buried in this parable is a question about waiting, and why sometimes it seems like our prayers take a long time to find any answer. This is a question that God's faithful people have wrestled with since the beginning of time. From the psalms to the prophets, many of God's followers have

wondered at God's timing. Jesus himself quotes the heartbreaking verse from Psalm 22 as he hangs, dying on the cross: my God, my God why have you forsaken me? Persistence is what this parable invites us into in those desperate-feeling times, whether they be in our personal lives or in the world around us, those times when it seems like things have spiraled out of control, like darkness might be closing in, like the goodness we seek and we know God desires for us feels far away. God invites us to bring all of that in prayer – to pray exactly what we're feeling, to give it over to God, and ask God what God wants us to do with it.

Persistence is key, to keep showing up, keeping talking to God, keep praying about the things that trouble us in ourselves and in the world around us, and trust that even while we wait for God's answer, God is working in us, shaping us, molding us, helping us discern God's will and the way God would like for us to act and be like in the face of any and everything we go through in life. Prayer helps us listen better, helps us invite God in and allows God the space to work in and through us to bring about the goodness we know God promises in the end. We just have to hold on to that promise, that God will act, that prayer does matter. God's perfect justice is both the prayer we are invited into, as well as God's promised future.

A persistent life of prayer, even and especially in the face of all the things we face in life, will change us. We are shaped by all the relationships we make with others, and that is especially true of God. In prayer we bring what we think and what we feel, what we worry about, what we celebrate, our hopes, our dreams, our concerns, our very selves to God, and we ask God what God wants us to do with all of that. We listen, we discern, and, with God's help, we work to align ourselves fully with God's will. We pray it together, week in and week out here at church: thy will be done, Lord, in the world around us and in our own hearts. Persistence and a deep belief

that God's justice will always prevail is key, Jesus tells us in this parable. I'll always be thankful for that question, asked all those years ago by a spiritual director who knew how powerful prayer can and should be: how is your prayer life? It's a question I keep asking myself, a goal I keep striving for, and one God invites all of us deeper into.