

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

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?"

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

We all know that pastors and congregations have a period of getting used to one another, learning about each other. In seminary, we talked about part of this "getting to know you" process in terms of **constructing a local theology**. That is, congregations over time develop ways of believing and behaving that are special, different from other congregations, and a wise pastor learns what these are before he or she decides to try to change them. Getting to know Saint Nicholas has been a wonderful journey, not even close to over yet.

One of the things that I think is very special about Saint Nicholas is how important prayer is in our life together. Nearly every meeting begins with prayer. Prayer over some decision is really doing something about it, something that is expected to be effective, to make a difference. Just this week, Kay mentioned in an email to me that maybe we should have a concerted prayer

effort for the North Wing, and I've been here long enough that I immediately thought, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

This is a congregation that takes the power of prayer very seriously. Now, I've been in other congregations that, I don't know how else to say this, but congregations that treat prayer a little less seriously. I know some congregations that use prayer as a way of giving God a "To Do" list. So the Assisting Minister or other worship leader who would really like to give a sermon instead writes up a long and florid prayer that tells God what we have in mind for him to do, complete with a timeframe and detailed step-by-step instructions. I think I might have done this once or twice when I was Assisting Minister at my home congregation, and if I did, I truly do apologize.

In some congregations, prayer becomes a way of clearing our thinking, of prioritizing and decision-making. So I pray until a way forward becomes clearer, until I know what I should do about a problem or a concern. This is certainly a useful process and I think that prayer can do that. I know as I've talked with some of you about your prayer lives that you use prayer times as a way to think things through. This has real advantages, seeing your life from God's perspective.

In some congregations and for some people, prayer times become literal conversations with God – I know I do this myself. Especially late at night when I can't sleep. Lately these conversations have been very lively – sometimes they aren't. Sometimes, I know, God is silent. So I ask questions and no answer comes. I wait, and nothing happens. That's very frustrating for me, probably you, too, if that ever happens. But other times, answers come back very quickly. Is this really God talking? I don't know. The voice I hear coming back sounds very much like my own voice, using words that I would use, but then that voice says things that are a lot wiser than I'm usually able to

be. Sometimes in these conversations God is a little more directive, asking harder questions, like, “Well, what did you expect to happen?” or “What could you possibly have been thinking of?” But then other times the answers are more patient, kinder, more gentle, God “talking me off the ledge” as I like to say. In these moments, God consoles, sympathizes and quiets me, settles me down. I like that.

I’ve seen some congregations use prayer corporately as a way of choosing among alternatives. So the congregation will pray together to see how God wants them to solve a problem or find a way forward, much like Kay was suggesting for the North Wing. I’ve also seen congregations use prayer as a way of expressing themselves. At other churches we’ve held prayer vigils for peace or for reconciliation.

At first glance, it doesn’t seem like the woman in today’s Gospel lesson is really praying, so much as nagging – certainly the unrighteous judge doesn’t seem to experience her as prayerful. That’s part of what’s interesting about the story. Jesus introduces the parable telling the disciples that they need to pray always and not lose heart, but then what he describes is the woman who keeps coming to a judge who neither fears God nor respects people and asking him to “Grant me justice.” The judge grants her justice so she won’t wear him out. A better translation is so she will stop battering him, literally giving him a black eye. Jesus uses the story to say that if continual nagging will change even an unrighteous man’s heart, then certainly God who loves us will grant justice to us. But, to me, the surprising point of the parable is that prayer is not just asking God for help, but is also active, continuous struggle. Just as the widow was struggling with the judge, Jacob literally wrestles with God for a blessing in the Old Testament reading. This is how Jacob gets his new name – “Israel” means one who wrestles with God. What a wonderful image for the people of God. We wrestle with God. And we do. All the time.

This puts prayer in a whole new light for me. In prayer we struggle with God, with God's plans for us, God's hopes for us as against our hopes for ourselves. We struggle and we fight and we curse, we run away, we hide but then we always return. As the reading from second Timothy puts it, we have "itching ears" – what a great picture that makes – and we cluster around teachers who tell us what we want to hear, a gospel of success and good times, your best life now, rather than a gospel of struggle for justice.

This vision of prayer as struggle and of Christians as prayer warriors is a whole different thing. Not passive, weak and puny, we are a people of powerful prayers, people who are active in seeking and demanding justice, who cry out to God on behalf of the widow and the orphan, the poor and the disenfranchised.

Now I don't want to go overboard with this – you know, my prayer chain is tougher than your prayer chain, we'll rumble tomorrow night behind the sacristy, like the Sharks and the Jets, only it's the Apostles against the Disciples – but the readings do give a kind of macho image to praying. This could make prayer a lot more popular among real guys, you know like the Sunday night prayer smackdown.

As I prepared for this sermon, late in the week I remembered that the Stephen Ministry group was beginning to read a book by Phillip Yancey called "Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference." So at the last minute I checked at the library, and found that it was already checked out. I called the used bookstore, but they didn't have it. I ordered it overnight from Amazon and as Friday went on, I found myself praying that the book would be delivered on time. Now that's ironic. Eventually, I had to begin the sermon anyway, before the book arrived – I just can't leave sermons to the last minute. Of course, my prayers were answered, but by the time the book arrived, I'd nearly finished the sermon. Sigh.

It is a very good book, by the way. One line is worth the price of the book – “The main purpose of prayer is not to make life easier, nor to gain magical powers but to know God. I need God more than anything I might get from God.” That’s really it in a nutshell. To know God, to be in relationship with God. We all know relationships take work, why wouldn’t a relationship with God take some work, too? And part of the nature of that work is prayer.

Brothers and sisters, I tell you that knowing God, knowing God’s plans for us, God’s hopes for us, God’s prayers *for us* is not the end, it is the beginning. The beginning of understanding, the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of action, the activity of God’s people on earth, inspired, motivated, consumed by a vision of the kingdom that God wants us to build with him.

The parable ends with Jesus’ question: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Well, as long as Kay has email, as long as we seek to know God and God’s will, as long as we are humble and persistent enough to ask, to seek, to knock, there will be faith on earth. May God be praised.

Amen.