

## ***The Prayer of Endless Suffering***

Luke 18:1-8

I am not a particularly persistent person. That's not to say I don't work hard or pursue things diligently. It just means I am willing to make a good faith effort for awhile, but if my progress toward satisfaction is slow, or I'm distracted by other matters, I will reach a point where I'll simply move on to something else more productive of my time and energy. Without any positive feedback or signs of encouragement, I am apt to believe things won't work out as I had hoped. Like many, I would prefer to give up or adjust my expectations than pursue something endlessly without success. I'm ever mindful of the proverbial definition of insanity, which is to persist at the same thing in the same way and somehow, expect a different result. Not me! I have plenty of others ways to go insane than to persist at futility!

For that reason, I'm not particularly moved by the message of today's parable from Luke (at least in how it's traditionally interpreted), i.e., persistence in prayer. I don't quibble with the practice of prayer; I just won't approach it with endless persistence. I never have; I know my limits. There are many times I've prayed earnestly for something to occur (or not to occur, as the case may be), but it has always been handled like a 100-yard sprint, rather than as a marathon. I'll ask for God's help for something I deeply desire with great intensity, fervor, and hopefulness over a few days' time, but if the answers are not forthcoming or progress isn't evident, then I'll be less hopeful about a positive result and rethink what I'm doing—assuming, of course, that with a slight adjustment in my outlook, my

expectations, and my heart's desires, the best outcome will become evident to me. I firmly believe that divine responses to prayer typically come when I've let go of control over how I want things to turn out. That's not easy to do, but it's the measure of my prayerfulness. I may seek, but I usually reconsider what I'll find!

I don't take this as a sign of disbelief, as I may have at one time. On the contrary, I view it as a sign of spiritual maturity, recognizing that the act *and art* of praying is intended to be a process of engagement with the Holy One that transforms *us* as much as we want it to change the circumstances and concerns of our lives. Few of us pray with the innocence and naiveté of a child, who anticipates a concrete and immediate return on the pleas offered up, even though it appears Jesus instructs us to do so. Instead, life experience teaches us otherwise: that time tends to play out and show us what may be the divine will (if that's even evident). On occasion that lines up with what we wanted all along, but mostly, things work out as they do and it's for us to discover the divine mercies in each situation. There's no fail-safe formula for manipulating heaven and earth to deliver what we want. We pray and then we discern and adjust to what we believe are the responses to those prayers.

In that light, the message of persistence that we glean from this parable can be appropriate for us, but not for the reasons apparent to us on the surface. It's not that we should be like a spoiled child who asks for whatever he or she wants and does so in a persistent, annoying, self-gratifying way, until the parents give in and accommodate their demanding child. That's often the message we hear from traditional views of this parable—that Jesus is encouraging

his followers to keep praying for that they want until God gives in and grants it! *Ask whatever you want and God will grant you the desires of your heart!* As long as you believe without questioning, then whatever you ask for—even mountains to be moved—you'll get, with the caveat, that if you don't get the answers you expected, it's because you weren't persistent or faithful enough!

The problem is, there are a lot of mountains in life that just don't move. It's not because we didn't nag God enough. It's that faith cannot simply dismiss reality in a mortal, material world. If persistence is the point of this parable and of the Gospel writer's message, it's because persistence provides us the time to sift through what are truly deep desires over and against impulsive, selfish wants—a sifting process that invariably changes the prayer and the pray-er. Persistence in prayer can engage a person into a depth of exploration and understanding of what it is they are asking and seeking to where they are able to sense and engage God's presence in situations that unfocused and inattentive people cannot.

But even if that is true—even if this is a spiritual value we can glean from this parable—is that really the main message of this story of the persistent widow who finally succeeds in bending the ear of a callous judge? Is this meant to be a message for us to pray unceasingly, even when there is no change? Or that we're to badger God with our problems until they get fixed? Or that we're to pray in a way that anticipates a power we possess to change the mind of God?

That may be what Luke had in mind as a take-away for his audience. But what if this isn't the intention of the original parable; what if it wasn't really about how to instruct us to pray, but something

else? If you look at the story itself apart from its Gospel setting, it seems as if something else was on the mind of Jesus.

This is what I find interesting, when you consider what and who the characters themselves represent. Hear the parable again, simply as story, without any reference to prayer:

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."

I could well imagine that Jesus had seen a situation like this play out, perhaps locally in Sepphoris, the Roman capital of Galilee, a few miles away from Nazareth—a city he would have visited regularly as a young man—a city where judges in service to Rome would arbitrate over legal matters of Galileans, including the Jewish population. Jesus' parable were often observations on the daily life and struggle of average people, which is what made them so appealing and profound and memorable.

Without a cultural context, we miss a great deal; it helps to grasp the Galilean world as Jesus may have experienced it. For instance, you and I need to know a little about the social status and struggles of widows (there's a reason taking care of widows and orphans was considered one of the essential acts of charity in Judaism). Widows and orphans were some of the most vulnerable and least protected people in the ancient world. They had no civil rights or legal standing. So from the outset, this tells us something about this widow's encounter with the judge: it wouldn't have taken

place in a court of law. Let me read for you an explanation of a widow's plight:

The Hebrew word for widow connotes one who is silent, one unable to speak. In a society in which males played the public role and in which women did not speak on their own behalf, the position of a widow—particularly if the eldest son was not yet married—was one of extreme vulnerability. If there were no sons, a widow might return to her paternal family (Lev. 22:13; Ruth 1:8) if that recourse were available. Younger widows were often considered a potential danger to the community and were urged to remarry (cf. I Tim. 5:3-15).<sup>1</sup>

Widows hovered below the radar; they had no voice in the public square; they were often hidden in their suffering. Widows were prohibited from collecting any inheritance from their deceased husbands, and thus, unmarried (which many were), they had no means to live on and became the stereotypical symbol of exploitation and oppression in ancient society. They couldn't get justice because they were not permitted to appear in public courtrooms. If they had no male advocate or protector, they simply suffered endlessly throughout the rest of their lives. This was the plight of widows!

So with that in mind, this is an unusual story—a startling one even—and it looks a bit different than just being about a nagging woman who wanted to get her way. It's about justice for those who rarely received it—about one for whom and whose treatment the entirety of society should be ashamed! For why might a widow be seeking justice? Because they were exploited and taken advantage of in a number of ways (e.g., sexual assault? unpaid labor? publicly shamed or punished? forced to live on the streets?). Without an advocate, widows could not get justice through legal means. So this

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 1992, pg. 397.

woman uncharacteristically cried out for it on the streets, perhaps every time this judge walked by on his way to court. This judge, likely a non-Jew, since he had no respect for the Hebrew God, YHWH, or apparently even a moral conscience (judges frequently only handed cases when they were enticed by bribes) had no reason to address, let alone consider, the plight of this unusually outspoken female! She, who stood up for herself and resiliently challenged the social taboos by yelling out in public for justice, making her case known, kept it up endlessly, until out of frustration (and not sympathy) the judge responded to the woman to shut her up by granting her wish.

That's what Jesus was illustrating in this parable: he was lifting up the endless suffering of those who are rendered silent and are never given a chance. If callous judges hear their pleas and finally give in, why should they not expect God's people to respond and grant them justice? Persistence was to be in seeking justice, in the pursuit of human dignity, persistence in ending exploitation, persistence in addressing injustice, persistence in standing up for those who are silenced by the customs and bigotries of gender roles, racial inequities, economic and legal status, and all the other things that put some people in a place of no hope and endless suffering—that make them poor and poor in spirit—that's the persistence that is being lifted up and honored by Jesus! It's the dedication to the plight of the oppressed that is being emphasized here in this parable!

Since no one else was standing up for her, this woman risked all to claim her own God-given dignity and pursued justice for herself, and everyone like her, with persistence. How much more can we expect from God and from those whom God inspires! That's the

persistence that really counts and the prayers that really yearn to be answered!

When I was thinking about this last week, my mind immediately went back to one of our speakers at our World Mission Conference a few weekends ago. Lauran Bethel is an American Baptist missionary who, from thirty years of service in this area, has become one of the world's leading activists for ending human trafficking and sex exploitation. She began her work in Thailand where she encountered so many young children and women caught up in the sex-trafficking trade, pornography, and prostitution. Most were sold into it by their families. We're not talking widows here—it's children, young girls, especially—who don't have a chance at life, who suffer endlessly because they are exploited by circumstances and people with evil intent to sell their bodies for someone else's perverted pleasure. These young women can't even go home because they are supposed to make money and send it back to their families. It is a terrible injustice, and yet it goes on across the globe and even within our own country.

Lauran has dedicated her life's work to free people from this terrible scourge, and her ministry continues today out of Amsterdam—one of the world capitals of the sex trade. As I see it, she and her colleagues are doing Jesus' work persistently—not only praying out of their faith to end such suffering, but advocating for justice to prevent people from being exploited and by extending help to families and teaching them how to make a living without selling their daughters into slavery. It is a remarkable ministry that has continued for decades and is growing in its influence. I'm grateful to

have had the opportunity to meet her and have her share the story of her work while here in Connecticut.

When you think about it, what we have in the Gospel setting of the parable of the persistent widow are two levels where prayer is actually relevant and meaningful. Luke has chosen to cast it in terms more personal, encouraging believers to pray unceasingly for the coming of God's reign, or as we often do, for the needs of our own lives, i.e. the traditional interpretation. Jesus, however, made the message about the pursuit of justice for those who are chronically and unfairly exploited in society—that this parable (if it's about prayer) is the prayer of endless suffering. For me, the dual emphases works, in part because it reminds us that God's coming reign is intended to right the wrongs of this world, and that praying is a radical act of belief that God hears and responds to the plaintive cries of the oppressed—that this, as an act of spiritual discipline or even as an urgent plea, is meant to draw us closer to what God intends for the world and for us personally, not to merely provide individual comfort or material reward.

The discipline of prayer, then, becomes a time for us to tune ourselves into *the desires of God's heart*, not just to satisfy our own, which is an important change in focus for many. This is a message we don't hear enough from those who proclaim God's word and who reduce prayer to being little more than reciting a "laundry list" of personal needs. Instead, prayer is the way we live and move into God's aspirations for all of creation that so often is spoiled and exploited by human sin and evil intent. In prayer, we join together with those who experience endless suffering and who earnestly seek

relief and hope for their lives. In doing so, our persistence comes, not because we don't find easy answers, but because we cannot give up praying until all have found peace and all have found justice. This is something that will bring us to our knees, particularly when we share the burden of such suffering with those who experience it on a daily basis.

Viewing the persistence of prayer in this way helps me grasp the real meaning in Jesus' own model prayer—the Lord's Prayer—which is what we are to earnestly plea every time we gather together, praying for those, and like those, who suffer needlessly and endlessly. It is their prayer; it is our prayer—the prayer of endless suffering:

Our Abba in heaven, reveal who you are.  
Set the world right;  
Do what's best—as done above, so let it occur below.  
Keep us alive with food each day.  
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others,  
who may repent from harming us.  
Keep us safe from ourselves  
and from that which results in evil.  
You are in charge! May our lives and our deepest desires reflect that truth.

May this be our prayer, for ourselves and for those who are silenced by their suffering to utter it. Amen and Amen.

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