

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

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 accuser.' 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?"

There was a pastor who had a parrot. All the parrot would say was, "Let's pray, let's pray." The pastor tried to teach him to say other things but to no avail. He learned that one of his deacons had a parrot. That parrot would only say, "Let's kiss. Let's kiss." So, the pastor decided to invite the deacon and his parrot over to his house. When the deacon arrived, they put the parrots into the same cage to see what would happen. The deacon's parrot said, "Let's kiss, let's kiss." The pastor's parrot said, "Thank you, Lord. My prayers have been answered." There's great power in prayer.

The parable we heard read to us this morning is about prayer—more specifically, persistence in prayer. Luke tells us this up-front. The story is told as a follow-up to a conversation Jesus was having with his disciples about the days ahead. As we know, Jesus knew God's plan for him, and he knew that his disciples were going to have a rough road to travel without him being there physically to help them carry-on God's mission. He wanted to encourage them, give them hope and a tool that would help them with their faith journey and with their obedience to God's call.

We read in Luke 17:22 that Jesus told them they would long for the day when he would be with them again, and he warns them that there will be those who will try to mislead them by claiming to be the Messiah.

He warned that the time between his ascension and his second coming, the world would fall into disarray. Most people will be going about their everyday tasks, indifferent to the demands of God. The same thing happened in Noah's day before the flood hit, and in Lot's day before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We are living in these days Jesus spoke of. People are suffering, and their suffering is being ignored. People live in fear—fear of illnesses, fear of violence, fear of war—and all of this is happening because too many live without any recognition of God. The church, the living body of Christ in today's world, suffers as it is ignored too.

Jesus warned the disciples, and he warns us that things are going to get pretty bad. Where would the disciples and where do we find the strength to persevere through dark and tumultuous times? Jesus gives us the answer through this parable. We will persevere if we pray, and we believe in the power of prayer.

As we approach this text, we should first consider our understanding of God. Who is God and what do we expect from God? In Jesus' story, he tells of a judge. This particular judge didn't want to be bothered by a woman who had been mistreated in some way. She was a widow, a

vulnerable and unfortunate soul who had been cheated out of what her husband had left her, which was everything she had to live on. Life was not easy for widows. Job opportunities were few.

This judge was not a Jewish judge. We know this because under Jewish law a matter was not taken before just one judge. There always were three: one chosen by the accuser, one by the suspect and one independently appointed. This judge was one of the paid judges appointed either by Herod or the Romans.

These judges were not so much interested in passing down fair judgements as they were interested in making money. They would ignore cases that did not benefit them. Unless a suspect had influence or money to bribe the judge, the case often would not be heard nor had any hope of getting settled. This court system was a joke, not justice but a flagrant form of robbery. The scripture tells us that the judge even knew he was a scoundrel because when he thought about this pesky woman, he admitted in his own mind that he did not fear God nor respect the woman, but he just wanted to get rid of her to gain some relief.

The judge figured that if he ignored the widow, she would go away. But he was wrong! She did not give up. She pursued him every day. The hearings in those days were not held inside an airtight building, but rather in a tent. Every day that this widow was there—probably at the front of the line—she demanded he hear her case and give her justice. He kept trying to ignore her until finally one day, he had had enough, and he corrected the injustice done to her.

Now we would be greatly mistaken if we thought Jesus was teaching us that God is like this judge. Almost as if with humor, he is actually pointing out the obvious—that God is nothing like this judge. God is compassionate and caring. God seeks out his children, longing to hear from them, seeking a relationship with them, wanting to provide us all with what is best for us. It's as if Jesus is saying through this illustration that if an unjust judge responds to constant pressure, how much more will a great and loving God respond to us. When we feel our prayers are not being answered, we need to keep this in mind. God is not at all like this uncaring judge.

Having taken a few moments to reflect on who God is and God's character, we need to consider ourselves, our expectations and our role in our relationship with God. The story invites us to step into the widow's sandals. Most of us do not face the same challenges this poor widow faced, but we all do experience difficulties in life that bring us down, looking for answers and direction, feeling desperate, looking for some kind of a break.

Like the widow, Jesus tells us we can turn to God, and we usually do that. We fervently pray to God for direction and help. Many times, we feel our prayers get answered; but there are other times when we've prayed about something for a very long time, yet we feel our prayer is being ignored. Frustration and doubt can creep into our prayer life when we feel our prayers go unanswered. What do we do with that?

Jesus tells us to rest assured that God hears all of our prayers; but God does not always answer when we want him to, nor does he always answer with the answer we are seeking. That doesn't mean God does not care, nor does it mean God is incapable of answering our prayers. Our God is far more capable of doing more than we can ask or even imagine. If it were not so, God would not be God.

Why then, does God delay in answering our prayers? Jesus points out through this story that the delay in justice for this widow was because of a selfish, self-centered judge. God is not a selfish God. God always acts out of self-sacrificing love. The ultimate proof of this is what happened to His only Son on that ugly cross. God gave his own Son as the sacrifice above all sacrifices, paying the price for sin, for all time. This does not sound like a selfish God to me.

God instead, because His love for us is so great, sees the bigger picture and knows—no—wants what is best for us. While it may not feel that way to us, that's what we must hold on to, even though we may not understand. Again, God is God, and we are not. We need God, which means we need to trust him. If we don't but take matters into our hands, we reject God and the perfect answers to our prayers.

In the end, according to God's timing, God does respond. Our timing is not God's timing. In 2 Peter 3:8, we read, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." In the commentary for this text on Bible.org, the author notes, God told Noah that there would be a flood, but 100 years went by without a drop of rain while Noah endured his mocking neighbors. He promised Abraham a son, but he watched Sarah go through menopause and 25 years elapsed before Isaac was born. He promised Joseph in his teenage years through his dreams that his father and brothers would bow down to him, but he spent his twenties in an Egyptian dungeon. He promised to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt, but 400 long years went by before He raised up Moses, and then only after a 40-year journey with Moses, did they enter the promised land. God promised to send His Messiah, but His people had to wait 400 years after the last prophet before, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son (Gal. 4:4).

Speedily by God's calendar is not speedily by ours! An answer to the problem of delayed answers to our prayers involves us, our expectations of God and our impatience with God. As we can see from this story, we need to have a proper view of God, who God is, what matters to God, what God is capable of doing, and God's timing.

Now we might get the impression that Jesus tells us to be persistent with our prayers so as to break God down to the point that he just gives in and gives us what we want. This is not the case. We're fools if we think that our persistent praying along with the great number of people we might have praying with us will make God cave in to doing our bidding.

Persistence in prayer has a different purpose. It does help us to keep in mind that God is God, and we are not. With that we humble ourselves and admit our need for the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God, meaning that we recognize our need for the one and only all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present God. It reminds us that this amazing and sovereign God is to be trusted no matter what may take place in our lives.

Persistence in prayer strengthens our relationship with God. We are reminded of our great value to God—a God who seeks us out with unimaginable love. There is nothing we could do or say that would ever stop God from loving us and from wanting a relationship with us. When we do not persist in seeking God through prayer, we in essence turn away from God's wonderful gift of love.

Persistence in prayer connects us with God, a Living God who walks with us through whatever difficulties and tragedies we may face. Even when God does not answer our prayers quickly, we can always know that he supports us until that time when our prayers are answered. And, if our prayers do not get answered as we wanted, we can know that he sits with us in our disappointment, even seeks to comfort us and assures us that his plan for us will be fulfilled. Persistent prayer keeps our Ever-present Living God close by—not that he ever leaves us—but in that, we create a space to know that he is with us.

In the dark fearful times of our lives, whether the feelings are brought on by illness, loss, brokenness, fear of the days we live in when a large portion of the world has rejected God and God's kingdom. Like the widow in Jesus' parable, we are taught to be persistent with our prayers, knowing that God hears them all, God answers them all and trusting God, our almighty

Creator God, the all-knowing God, our Living and Loving God, trusting him with the answers he gives.

My mom is a prayer warrior. Her prayer life is a powerful witness to me about her faith and her belief that God answers prayers. She is very aware that not all prayers get answered as we want them to be answered, but she knows his answers are perfect.

There was a dark time in our family's life when my brother had distanced himself from all of us. Grief-stricken over the loss of his beloved first wife, he fell into a very unhealthy relationship where the expectation was for him to remove himself and his daughters from our lives. It was an excruciatingly painful time in our lives.

Fearing more than anything that he would not return to us while my parents were still with us, I became angry. I prayed something would change, but I suspect my anger kept me from believing anything would change. Mom, on the other hand, told me she prayed every day, and she knew that one day, my brother was going to climb the stairs to the door of their home, and walk back into our lives. She never stopped praying.

Ten years later, I received an email from him saying his bad marriage was over. He apologized and wondered if I would welcome him back into my life. There was no question that I would. He asked me not to tell mom and dad because he wanted to talk with them.

Very soon after I got that email, my brother climbed the stairs to my parents' home, walked through their door, and fell into my mother's embrace. Her persistent prayers were answered. She knew they would be.

I know that not everyone's persistent prayers get answered with the results sought as this did for my mom. Why? I am not sure, because as I said earlier, God is God, and I am not. I do know this: God is capable, but in circumstances such as this example, I am reminded that God has given us free choice. My brother had to make the choice to return to us. But, hearing my mom's persistent prayers..., I believe, God responded by never leaving my brother, and God continued to knock at the door of his heart, presenting him with any opportunity to choose to return to us. Fortunately, he did.

Do not be discouraged when it seems your prayers are not getting answered. Be assured that God hears them and is at work to answer them and will, in God's time, with our good in mind. We may not always understand the answers...But hopefully, like me, you can be at peace and trust our God, who is greater and wiser, who loves us more than we ever could imagine. Jesus tells us to pray with persistence and know that God will answer your prayers. Amen.