

NOT LOSING HEART: A LESSON IN PRAYER

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Text: 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 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?"

MY FIRST WEEK ON the job at my first church, a man from the congregation came into the office to see me. His name was Bob. He was a retired high school English teacher. He'd been a member of the church forever, and he had a reputation for being a little bit gruff. It was the middle of winter in upstate New York, and he was all bundled up in a parka, with one of those hats with flaps that come down over your ears and snap together under your chin. So, all I could see were these two beady eyes drilling into me.

He looked pretty scary, and I remember thinking, "Oh no, what did I do? Am I in trouble already?" But it turned out he wasn't there to yell at me. He had a question about prayer. He wanted to know what's the point of asking God for stuff if God already knows what we need. Why bother? Why not just say, 'Thy will be done, 'and let God work out the details?

It's a good question, and I have to admit, sometimes when I'm doing the prayers of the people, I think about Bob, and I wonder the same thing. I mean, I love that part of the service, and I know how meaningful it is. But on a purely theological level, is all that asking really necessary? Because I'm sure God's well aware of all the wars going on in the world, all the disasters, all the injustices. I'm sure God's well aware of all the things going on in our personal lives, as well.

And yet, as sure as I am that God doesn't need us to point out all the places where people are hurting, in the gospel reading this morning,

Jesus says there's something about the asking itself that's important. There's something about the act of bringing our needs to God in prayer that's necessary—not for God, but for us.

He tells a story about our "need to pray always and not lose heart." There's a widow, he says, who keeps nagging a judge to give her justice in a dispute she's having. At first, the judge ignores her, but eventually he grants her request, not because he's a good person—he neither fears God nor respects other people—but because he's sick of listening to her. And the point is, if someone like that, someone who doesn't care about anyone but himself, can respond to another person's need, imagine how much more God will respond to our needs. Because God does care about us—deeply. So, we shouldn't get discouraged if we don't get an answer right away. We should keep praying and trust that God doesn't hear it as nagging. God welcomes our prayers. God wants that interaction, that engagement.

So, in answer to Bob's question, yes, there is a point to asking God for stuff, but it goes beyond the asking. It's about the conversation that takes place between us and God over time. It's about the relationship that develops as we continue to have that conversation, day after day, year after year. That's what's necessary about prayer, and that's what we need to aim for.

IT'S THE MOST NATURAL thing in the world to cry out to God when we're in need. There's

something instinctive in us that reaches upward when we're in trouble. When a storm comes up and our boat starts taking on water, the first thing we do is look up at the sky and yell, "Help!" And there's nothing wrong with that. It's a very honest kind of prayer.

But it should also just be a starting point. Because if praying is something we only ever do when there's a problem, if we never go beyond that, then our prayer life is always going to be transactional and intermittent. It's always going to be about getting what we need right now and then going on our merry way and not giving God another thought until the next time there's a problem. But that's not a relationship. That's treating God like a great big vending machine in the sky. Prayers go in, answers come out, and that's the end of it.

I admit, I'm guilty of that myself. I remember praying constantly for Mimi when she was in the hospital a few years ago. But when she got out and was doing better, my prayers slowed down. As the need felt less and less urgent, God gradually got pushed to the back of my mind.

Real relationships don't work like that. Real relationships are about being part of each other's lives, not occasionally, but consistently; and not because we want to get something, but because we want to become something. Relationships challenge us to grow as human beings. They teach us generosity, patience, humility. They give us strength, wisdom, self-understanding. They make our lives about more than just ourselves.

This is what Jesus is getting at in this parable. Prayer over time brings us into relationship with God, and through that relationship, we grow into the people God calls us to be—people who stay grounded in faith even when life feels uncertain; people who know there's a larger story being written beyond what we can see; people who are attuned to the presence of grace all around us. When we pray for someone who's sick, for instance, we start to notice all the small mercies that happen every day—the meal that shows up on the doorstep, the friend who stops by to check in, the moment of laughter that breaks through the pain. And we start to see how God's presence is woven through all of it, even if the healing we long for doesn't come in the way we expect. We might pray for healing and instead witness reconciliation. We might pray for a cure and instead discover courage. We might pray for more time and instead find more peace.

I WISH I'D BEEN able to explain all that to Bob, but I didn't know much back then. It's okay, though. I don't think he needed me to explain it to him. I think he was already living it. Once you got past the gruff exterior, he was actually one of the kindest souls you could ever meet. My kids grew up calling him "Grandpa Bob." And a big part of that was the fact that he prayed every day, and it shaped who he was. It gave him this steady calm, this inner peace, even when his health started to fail and life became a struggle for him.

I remember visiting him in the hospital a few years later, after he'd fallen and broken his hip. He was in a lot of pain, exhausted, facing things no one should have to face. But when I asked how he was doing, he said, "Well, I'm still talking to God, and God's still listening. So at least I'm not alone." His persistence in prayer kept him connected to something beyond himself—a God who's larger than any pain or loss.

So, when Jesus asks at the end of the parable, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"—I think what he's really asking is: Will he find people whose hearts are still turned toward God—people who haven't given up on the conversation? Because faith isn't about having all the answers or being in control. It's about staying in relationship—continuing to show up, continuing to reach out, continuing to believe that love is stronger than anything that tries to pull us away from it.

So, here's my invitation to you this week: keep praying. Keep bringing your needs to God, keep bringing the needs of others, and keep trusting that God hears you—even when the answers don't come the way you expect. If you do that, over time, something more will begin to happen. Your heart will begin to open. You'll begin to see grace where you once saw only absence. You'll begin to feel companionship where you once felt alone. And like Bob, you'll find that the conversation itself—that steady, persistent turning toward God—becomes the ground you stand on.

Pray with me:

GRACIOUS GOD, YOU KNOW what we need before we ask, and yet you invite us to ask anyway—not because you need our words, but because we need to speak them. We need to turn our hearts toward you. We need to know we're not alone.

Teach us to be persistent in prayer. Help us show up, day after day, trusting that this is how we stay connected to you. This is how we keep our hearts open. And when the answers don't come the way we expect, help us to trust that you're still listening. When the silences are long, remind us that the conversation itself is what holds us. May we, like the widow in the parable, and like Bob, refuse to give up on you—because you never give up on us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.