

Stuck in Prayer
A Sermon for October 16, 2016
Luke 18:1-8
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Although we've been working through the Gospel of Luke in our readings during Sunday worship, at Bible study we've been studying the Gospel of Matthew-- the first book of the new testament. Those who have been attending know that their pastor had a very ambitious plan of reading and study that would allow us to finish a large chunk of the book before Advent at the end of November, when our Sunday reading will switch to Matthew. I had planned for us to study the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5 through 7 in two 1-hour sessions. But the past two weeks, it would seem, the Spirit had other plans. On several occasions we have found ourselves being stuck on a few verses of the words of Jesus. And this past week, one of the places that we got "stuck" was when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray-- not because we were stumped, exactly, but because it's such a big topic, and there is such a yearning to understand prayer.

And so I had been preparing to preach a sermon that would incorporate the 3 passages that we read this morning, from Jeremiah about the new covenant, from 2 Timothy about the authority of scriptural teaching, and from Luke about prayer. But as in bible study, I find myself stuck, as it were, in prayer. In fact, I'm essentially stuck on the first verse of the reading from chapter 18.

"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

We find many times across the Gospels that Jesus goes away to private places to pray.

- (Lk 4:42) “daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place.
- (Lk 5:16) “he would withdraw to deserted places and pray”
- (Lk 6:12) “Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.
- (Lk 9:18) “when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him”
- (Lk 9:28) “Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray”
- (Lk 11:1) “He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray,”

And now in chapter 18, “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”

Jesus himself needed to pray. Did you miss that? Jesus, who is God incarnate, God in the flesh, the Eternal Word united with humanity, the second person of the Holy Trinity in human form-- Jesus *needed* to pray. Now, I don't know about you, but in my life I've been pretty good at coming up with excuses not to pray. Sometimes I've thought that I didn't need to pray. Well, if ever there was a person that could have used that excuse, it was Jesus. And yet Jesus prays, because this is how a limited, finite human relates to an unlimited, infinite God. And while Jesus is God in the flesh, Jesus limits himself to our human experience. And in doing that, Jesus is not 50% human and 50% divine. Jesus is 100% human and 100% divine. Jesus had at his disposal the exact same tools of relating to God that we do. And so Jesus prayed. Jesus *needed* to pray.

“Jesus told them a parable about *their* need to pray...”

It's so good to slow down sometimes and think about this! The disciples literally walked and talked with Jesus. They went where he went, and saw what he saw. They sat down and ate meals with him; they healed the sick and cast out unclean spirits with him.

If ever there was a group of disciples that would have had an excuse not to pray, it was the 12. And yet Jesus tells his disciples about *their* need to pray. Are you with me?

We need to pray. As a church we need to pray, yes, but each of us individually needs to pray. Many of us believe that God works through prayer, but we still don't pray because we don't think we're very good at it. And so we ask other people to pray for us, or for a situation. That, of course, is a good thing. That's part of what it means to be the church.

But each of *us* needs to pray, too, which means that each of us *can* pray. How often do we try to outsource our prayer life? Maybe you're blessed to know a few people who seem really-- you know-- really good at prayer.

We always seek a mediator with God. We know that we're unable to effectively bring our requests to God, and so we try to get someone else in the middle of it. Well I've got to tell you something. Jesus is the only mediator between the God the Father and humanity. Jesus' death brought about the new covenant that Jeremiah talked about. (That's why Jesus lifted the cup on the night he gave himself for us and said "this is my blood of the new covenant.") And because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Jesus is now and forever the one through whom we approach the Father.

And so Jesus is in the middle of every prayer between you and the Father. When your prayer is weak, Jesus makes it strong. When your prayer is for something worthless, Jesus transforms it into something worthwhile. And most dangerous of all, when your prayer is

half-hearted, Jesus makes it genuine. Do not outsource your spirituality. Do not practice vicarious faith. Jesus takes your imperfect prayers, sums them up, and offers them to the Father perfectly.

My sisters and brothers, I can witness to the reality that the times in my life when God has acted most clearly through prayer, my prayer wasn't particularly inspiring-- it was just honest in some small way. Now I think scripture teaches us that there are ways to pray that show God that we're serious-- or at least they show us that we're serious. Perhaps we'll get to that in a minute.

But just yesterday someone told me about a time when he was praying for people in his church. He said he was being systematic about it, which is always helpful-- just going down the list and lifting each person up to God. But then he came to this one person-- this person who was so unlikeable that he told me, "I just couldn't pray for them." And so he said to God, "God, I cannot pray for this person. They're just too foul. I don't have enough love in my heart to do it. If I'm going to pray for this person, I'm going to need your love."

And then he told me that he was picked up out of his chair and thrown into the middle of his room. Then he felt as if a fire had been lit in his chest-- not a pleasant warmth, but a consuming fire. It was so intense that he said he told God that if it didn't stop, he was going to die. The fire subsided, and his heart was left with the love of God. Jesus took his half-hearted prayer to love someone that he didn't love, and offered it to the Father as a perfect prayer. And so the Spirit came in force. This was not a heart attack, but a heart invasion-- the cleansing, consuming fire of the Holy Spirit. I'm a Methodist, my brothers and sisters, but sometimes God does things. Very rarely will it ever be that dramatic for any of us, but what matters is not the power of the person praying, but the power of the one being prayed to. Prayer is not for the faint of heart

You're beginning to see how I got stuck on verse 1.

“Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray *always*...”

Or another way of saying it would be “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray *at all times*.”

Prayer isn't optional for Jesus' disciples. Each of us *needs* to pray. But Jesus speaks here about a characteristic of our prayer that many will find difficult to understand, let alone to do. And lest we think “always” is just a throwaway word that doesn't carry much weight, Paul in 1 Thess 5:17 says, “pray continuously.”

Prayer is at the heart of the practice of being a Christian. But it's obvious that Jesus doesn't envision his disciples kneeling all day. His disciples are to be about working for God in the world. So what does Jesus mean by praying always.

When Katie and I are apart, I'm always thinking of things that I want to tell her. Sometimes it's to share the things of my day, the good and the bad. I made a difference in someone's life today. I passed that same homeless woman at Caton and Hammonds Ferry. Other times it's just that I want her to experience what I'm experiencing-- a beautiful sky when the sun is rising, the Blue Angels flying over, Caleb getting really exciting when he can see train tracks. When the evening comes and things are settling down at home, we can finally catch up and spend some time together.

With God, I can carry on the conversation all day. As those things happen, things that I'm thankful for or things that I'm struggling with, I just immediately bring it God. Nice work on the sky, Lord. Good job with that deer. Stephen needs your help, God. I need you, Lord.

Even when I'm not directly talking to God, I can have a sense that I'm keeping God looped in on the conversation and on the day.

Jesus says we *need* to pray continuously. And so we ask God for help to do so. But the reality is that we learn to pray by praying. And we learn to pray at all times by starting to pray at some times.

Let particular times trigger prayer. Noon is especially easy and helpful, because you're probably counting down the minutes until lunch anyway. Before you know it, you'll be praying every noon-- even if it's just a reminder to keep God with you through the afternoon. Then add a time in the morning and evening, like 8 o'clock. Then maybe use one of those watches that beeps obnoxiously on the hour. Once you're praying every hour, that frames everything you're doing. Prayers aren't interruptions-- they're the framework of a life built by God. Life is lived in between the prayers, until that time when your whole life becomes one big prayer.

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always *and not to lose heart.*”

Get this: Jesus knew that we would face discouragement in our prayers. But he knew that we needed to persist,

Jesus knew that his followers would be praying “thy kingdom come, and thy will be done on earth.” And yet they would look at the world around them and shrink before all of the injustice and the pain, and be discouraged that the kingdom had not fully come.

Many of Jesus' own followers would experience injustice. And nothing can stop a life of prayer like thinking that your prayers aren't heard. If that's the way you think, then Jesus knows that you'll be discouraged. After all, being discouraged in prayer is something that comes out of faith. If you had no faith, you wouldn't be discouraged that your prayers appear unanswered, because you didn't expect God to work through prayer in the first place.

It says, **Jesus tells a parable**-- a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

In Jesus' parable there are two characters. The first is a judge that has no reverence for God and no respect for people. In other words, he doesn't care about anything or anyone but himself. And yet this judge is one who occupies a place of power, authority, and privilege. This judge bears no resemblance to God, who liberated Israel from their Egyptian oppressors, and whose Law is well-seasoned with protections for the vulnerable groups of the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

The second character is indeed a widow. And as tends to happen to vulnerable people in society, she finds herself with very few options once the legal system has failed her. But this widow who has no authority whatsoever over the judge will not be cowed into forever being a victim of injustice. She becomes the squeaky wheel so that she'll get the grease. She just keeps coming and pummeling him with her requests. And eventually the widow wears the judge down.

I like the way that the Message translation captures what's going on here: the Judge says, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.' ”

Then Jesus says, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? 8 I tell you, he will give them justice quickly.”

The point is that if even an unjust judge will give justice because of a powerless widow's badgering, won't God a righteous judge give justice to the people his chosen people? The people that have a mediator in Jesus to offer up their prayers to the Father.

And then Jesus adds “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

What will Jesus find in us? Will Jesus find people of prayer? People who hastened the day of his coming through their prayers. People who cried out to God for justice day and night believing that the one who began a good work in them would see it to completion. Will he find people of the new covenant, brought about by Jesus’ blood-- people who know the justice of God? Will we have persisted in resisting oppression and seeking justice through prayer and action? Will I be a person who prays and acts for justice for the widow-- for the orphan... for the alien? Will you be?