

Title: Praying with Persistence

Subtitle: Gaining the confidence we need to pray with boldness.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/crWVsIe-PB0>

The Parable of the Persistent Widow that was read today in our Gospel opens with these words, ***“Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”***¹ This is one of the few instances where a distinct statement introduces a parable as to its drift and aim. And the context which immediately precedes this parable is a description of a godless culture, which was much like it was in ***“the days of Noah,”***² when worldly pursuits swallowed up people’s focus.

We all have to admit that the drift of our culture pulls at all of us and affects our ability to pray. Unfortunately, none of us are immune to this. One of the hardest things about praying is finding a focus that gives us a handle on how to pray. I am so thankful that we have a church heritage that has given us the Book of Common Prayer. It has given me a way to build my prayer life on the shoulder of giants, but like training wheels for a bicycle, it is only meant to get us started.

I remember when Ellen and I were first married, our attempts at prayer were extremely humbling. Ellen would look at me and say something like, “You know how to pray, and I don’t. So please do it for me.” Honestly, I didn’t feel like I was very good at praying, but I knew how to use the Book of Common Prayer. I started with using the Lord’s Prayer in the Morning office and went through the versicles and responses, then on to the collects, which we shared responsively. This process gave Ellen a vocabulary for prayer when she didn’t feel she had one.

¹ Luke 18:1

² Luke 17:26 ““Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man.”

For it to be real, prayer must be grounded in heartfelt faith. So when Paul wrote to Timothy in our New Testament lesson today, he reminded him in the opening chapter about his “sincere faith, a faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and now, Paul was sure, still lived in him.”³ He then reminds Timothy, “*rekindle the gift of God that is within you.*”⁴ Then in today’s lesson, he encouraged him to “*continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which can make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*”⁵

Our liturgy also makes us acquainted with these sacred writings, and we need to pay attention to them, for they impart strength in times of suffering and empower us to persevere in faith. This principle is demonstrated not only by our parable today but also by Jacob, who wrestled with the Angel of the Lord in our Old Testament lesson today. In that lesson, Jacob said, “*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*”⁶ Both stories show us what it means “*to wrestle with God and man and prevail.*”⁷

In the chapter which immediately precedes our parable, Jesus describes a world that would cause himself and his followers much suffering.⁸ And the power structures that the saints often find themselves wrestling against are much like this unjust judge, “*who had neither fear of God nor respect for anyone.*”⁹ Yet, nothing would deter her single-minded focus

³ 2 Timothy 1:5 (Paraphased)

⁴ 2 Timothy 2:6

⁵ 2 Timothy 3:14-15

⁶ Genesis 32:26

⁷ Genesis 32:28

⁸ Luke 17:25 But first (the Son of Man) he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation

⁹ Luke 18:2

despite the unlikelihood of justice being provided. Time after time, the widow appears before the judge, saying, ***“I want justice against my opponent,”***¹⁰ even though, time after time, her request is denied.

As I emotionally engage with the drama of this parable, I cannot help but wonder if anger against injustice is what fueled this woman’s intensity. When I personally deal with negative emotions, I find the Psalms to be a great source of comfort

The Psalm appointed for today is just one example. It is written about a pilgrim on his way to Jerusalem to worship. But the success of his journey becomes a parable for the whole of one’s life. When faced with adversity, the Psalmist asks, ***“From where is my help to come?”***

The world we live in today is increasingly hostile with temptations and trials that abound. And I am not just referring to the situation in Ukraine. There are unjust powers and forces which we all confront. But when our hearts are overwhelmed, we need to pray that we will be ***“led to the rock that is higher than I.”***¹¹ For our ***“help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”***¹²

The letter from James assures us, ***“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”***¹³ We have more influence on the events around us than you may realize. But such faith requires patience, for often, our prayers are not answered as quickly as we would like.

Examples from scripture abound on this subject. The most notable of is that of Abraham, who in his old age waited for over twenty-five years for God’s promise of an heir to be fulfilled.

¹⁰ Luke 18:3

¹¹ Psalm 61:2

¹² Psalm 121:2

¹³ James 5:16

David, in the Psalms, prayed:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?¹⁴

Sometimes it may seem God is indifferent. And sometimes, it may seem as if we do not have the strength to endure. But thankfully, the God we serve is not like that unjust judge. Moses wrote:

***“He is a Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.***

***A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.”***¹⁵

The parable concludes with Jesus saying, ***“will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. But, nevertheless, will he find faith on earth when the Son of Man comes?”***¹⁶

The parable begs the question that only we can answer. Will we be found faithful when he returns? If so, we will have to learn to nurture our faith by daily feeding on the word of God and take hold of the great and precious promises found there.

Secondly, we will also need the discipline of praying consistently for those in need around us.

Lastly, will we persevere in prayer and ***“... wait upon the LORD so that our strength can be renewed?”***¹⁷ We all, at

¹⁴ Psalm 13:1-2

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 32:4

¹⁶ Luke 17:6-8

¹⁷ Isaiah 40:31

times, get weary, but let us not faint. For if we persevere, we shall find and experience the abundance of knowing that God is able to do more than we could ever ask or imagine. *Amen.*