

Luke 18:1-8
"Relentless"
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On April 20th, 1997, I got a phone call from my father. I was a student at Chapel Hill, a senior one week away from completing my final exams and graduating to the real world. I remember that phone call because of the way my father sounded, the anxious tone in his voice that told me immediately that something was wrong. Sure enough, he told me that my grandfather and uncle, who had been flying in my grandfather's old World War I Stearman Trainer airplane, had crashed into Jordan Lake. "We don't know anything for sure right now," my father said, "so we're hoping that they're both alright." I was, as you might imagine, incredibly worried after hearing the news, and I remember hanging up the phone, then retreating to my room to pray. I don't think I've ever prayed as hard for anything as I prayed that afternoon. I prayed relentlessly, and I asked God with every ounce of energy that I had to let them make it through. Help them God, I prayed. Help all of us. It was a few hours later that I got the second phone call, this one from my mother. It was the one I remember for the news that I hoped I would not hear.

I spoke at both of their funerals. To this day, I still don't know how I maintained enough composure to put simple words and phrases together. And even now, I marvel at the fact that I took part in worship services that thanked God for their lives, while inside I was beginning to wonder whether my prayers for God's help were meaningless. It was an experience that would eventually shape my relationship with God for the rest of my life, and ultimately alter my perception of who God is.

When we first begin to learn about God as small children, I think our notion of God is necessarily simplistic. We may see God as an old grandfather in the sky, or maybe as a divine bogeyman who is just waiting for us to screw up so he can set us straight. Sooner or later our relationship with God takes the form of spoken prayer, typically involving expressions of thanks to God. I see this now in my soon-to-be-four-year-old. When A.J. and I say prayers together before he goes to bed, they generally consist of a list of things that we are thankful for. He hasn't yet learned that God is a lot more powerful than Mommy and Daddy, so when Mommy and Daddy say no to something, you have one more person higher up the ladder that you can ask. Eventually, A.J. is going to start

asking God for things in his prayers, just like we all do. He's going to learn that sometimes you get what you ask for. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes you pray and everything turns out all right. Sometimes you pray and it seems like you haven't even been heard. Our Old Testament reading for this morning is a good illustration of that experience. The Psalmist cries out to God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Sometimes relentless prayer is met with nothing at all. And those are some of the most troubling times that we can face.

Evidently Jesus' own disciples knew troubling times like those. Evidently they had known what it's like to pray, and pray, and pray, and get discouraged because even though the prayers are relentless, they don't seem to be working. So Jesus takes a moment to tell them a parable "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." He tells them the story of a widow woman, who relentlessly pesters an irreligious and disrespectful judge to rule in her favor and grant her justice. Eventually her persistence wears him down and sure enough, he gives her exactly what she wants.

Jesus offers this unjust judge as a contrast to God, who is just, and merciful, and loving. He asks his disciples, "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" If this ignorant judge can do it, why not God?

So often I think this text has been misinterpreted and misused to give us a picture of God as some holy vending machine in the sky. As long as you put in the right combination of stuff into the coin slot by saying the right words, displaying the correct humility, and having a strong enough faith in God, then ba-bump, ba-bump, whatever you asked for comes tumbling down the chute and you can simply lift up the door and take it. There's a whole movement called the prosperity gospel built on this notion of God. It claims that God really wants us all to have all kinds of stuff, and not just good stuff but the greatest stuff, and to get it all we have to do is ask for it in the correct way and be persistent with our asking. To a less outrageous degree many Christians who don't assume that God wants them to be rich still carry around a notion that God will bless you *if* you do the right things, *if* you say the right words, and *if* you pray the right prayers. It's a notion of God that suggests that who God is and what God does depend on ultimately on us.

Call me crazy, but I don't think that's what this text is saying. In fact, I think it's saying just the opposite. To be sure, this parable does tell us about who God is and it does tell us something very important about prayer, but to see that we have to look at what immediately precedes the parable. Just before Jesus tells the story of the widow and the unjust judge, he warns them with a frightening foretelling of the end of the age. At the end of chapter seventeen, Jesus says, "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it." He warns them that the night will come when people will be snatched from their beds and likens the human condition to a corpse that will eventually draw vultures. He's talking about the coming of the kingdom, the day of the Lord, in which all the evils and injustices of the world will be overthrown and given over to the ultimate judgment of our loving and just God. Jesus speaks of the coming kingdom of God in harrowing terms, and where it's mentioned in scripture it's often described in frightening detail. However, scripture (and Jesus) is very clear that the coming kingdom of God is something that we all *long for*. We dream of that day and pray for that day because we know that even though the world in which we

live is full of injustice, the ultimate authority in all matters is God, whose love and grace and mercy are given to us while we are yet sinners. Though we live in times of trouble, we know that God will ultimately have the final word.

Consider this widow that comes to the unjust judge. Being a widow, she would have had no rights or real standing in her society. She would have been a worthless outcast, and we can infer that everything she owned with her husband - their property, their money, and their possessions - have been claimed by someone else after her husband died. She would have no claim to it. So, she goes to the person at the top of the ladder who can rule in her favor: the local judge. He's a rather detached and cold-hearted individual, but eventually due to her persistence and her pestering, he grants her what she wants. Jesus tells this parable as an illustration of how to pray and not lose heart, but notice that the widow woman never really asks the judge for anything specific. She doesn't hound him in order to make some personal request. Rather, she asks him for *justice*. She has been wronged by someone with far more power than she has. She has been outcast, forgotten, walked on, and left for dead. And through her despair she cries out for justice. And

she does so day after day after day. It must have seemed to her that her crying out wasn't really doing any good. After all, the judge kept ignoring her! She must have become discouraged. She must have lost heart at times when it seemed like this judge, the one person who could help her, wouldn't even give her that time of day. She represents all who face injustice and begin to lose heart. She stands for all who have no voice or standing in their society and cry out to be recognized and treated as human beings. She is a symbol for all who are broken down by the evils and injustices of this world and long for a better day.

It is in *this* context that Jesus tells his disciples to pray. He knows that they will experience suffering and persecution. He knows that they will face frightening moments when evil assails us in the middle of the night. He even recognizes that our sinful condition is part of the problem, saying, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" It's a rhetorical question, but clearly the answer would be 'no'. And yet, Jesus promises that justice will be granted, and soon. The weary world will find its comfort, and peace, and relief. Tears will be wiped away from our faces. Mourning will be turned into dancing. Death will simply

disappear in the midst of abundant, joyful, eternal life. And it will happen, not because of who we are, and not because of anything we've done. It will happen because of who God is. And if this judge can do it just to get rid of an obnoxious lady, *how much more will God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?*

It's the crying day and night that connects us with God's grace, and mercy, and peace. It's the constant longing for a better day that reminds us of God's love and justice. It's prayer after prayer after prayer for God's kingdom to come, that opens our eyes to the plight of the outcast, the downtrodden, and the voiceless, and makes us want to work for good and share the love of Christ with those who suffer. Escaped slave Frederick Douglass said that he prayed for twenty years and received no answer until he prayed with his legs. Sometimes the clearest answer to prayer comes when you let your prayer become action. That's what Jesus is telling us in this parable. In the midst of suffering, and death, and sinfulness, and evil, and injustice in our world, we are called to pray without ceasing, to long for the day of God's kingdom, and to work for the sake of others who have found no justice, no comfort, and no peace. A lot of times when I sit down to write the prayer of

the people for Sunday worship, I'll think about what to pray for. Usually it's a pretty stable list: justice, relief from violence, comfort for those who mourn, peace for those who suffer. Over and over and over we ask for these things. Do you ever listen to our corporate prayers together on Sunday and wonder if it's doing any good? Do you ever lose heart that we constantly have to ask for things like peace, and unity, and comfort? Over and over and over again we pray... it's relentless. But, as this parable reminds us, maybe the point isn't to pray until we get what we want. Maybe the point is to pray until you remember who God is, and trust that God's kingdom will come. Mother Theresa said, "Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at his disposition, and listening to his voice in the depths of our hearts." And as Christ's followers, we are called to relentlessly *pray*.

And as the widow in Jesus' parable shows us, the most important time to pray is when we feel like our prayers are meaningless, when we feel like our relationship with God just isn't working. You pray, and you pray, and you pray some more, and sometimes you won't even get what you pray for. But you might get what you need, namely a sense of God's loving presence, and a

measure of God's strength and God's peace to see you through your suffering. You see, our prayers aren't answered according to the things we do, or the emotions we feel, or the words we say. No, they are answered according to who God is, and that's why we can have comfort, and strength, and peace. We know that the promise of God's kingdom is for us. We know that God's ultimate love for the world and for each and every one of us never ends. It's persistent. It's powerful. It's relentless.

Thanks be to God. Amen.