

Spirited Persistence.  
A sermon preached at Emmanuel College  
October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
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Luke 18: 1-8

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Being named one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English speaking world may not be your ambition as you make your way through theological school, but would any of us turn down such an honour? Following this recognition, Barbara Brown Taylor surprised me by publishing her book entitled “Leaving Church”. In it she writes: “I had the idea that the practice of ministry alone should nourish me. I thought that God would keep depositing funds in my account whenever my balance got low. I thought that all I had to do was give myself fully to the work, and God would keep me in business.” She continues:

“The demands of parish ministry routinely cut me off from the resources that enabled me to do parish ministry. I knew where God’s fire was burning, but I could not get to it. I knew how to pray . . . but by the time I got home each night it was all I could do to pay the bills and go to bed, . . . my desire to draw as near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow. My role and my soul were eating each other alive . . . because I did not know how to give my soul what it wanted; I continued to play my role, becoming more brittle with every passing day.”

Hers is a cautionary tale.

Last week I was facilitating a workshop for lay pastoral visitors and a participant asked question about prayer. Without skipping a beat, someone else piped up saying: “prayer is an intimidating word.”

Many of us can identify with the widow in today’s parable. The disparity in power between the two characters is palpable. Like her, we and others in the church may be persistent but yet often feel helpless in light of the seemingly endless injustice we

see, not only in our city, but also around the world. Daily we are reminded of economic, social, and environmental injustices that affect us as a world community, that individually we are powerless to change. Many of us are part of communities that faithfully bring these needs both to prayer and to action, but they remain overwhelming. Faithful congregations in our own church persistently struggle to grow or at least to remain open. At the individual level, like the parable's widow, we may persist in prayer for a desired outcome for ourselves or others, perhaps around life-threatening illness, serious loss or other difficult life circumstances. All too often, these authentic persistent prayers appear to fall on deaf ears.

Take a step back with me for a moment: This parable is found only in Luke, and introduces prayer which is one of Luke's main themes. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus 'withdraws to pray' eight times; he also instructs his audience on prayer on seven occasions. In an unusual literary device, the writer begins with the meaning of the parable: to pray always and not lose heart. Why is it not enough to stop here, with this clear, direct message?

I can't speak for the writer of Luke, but I can certainly speak to why we need more help in this regard. Something that sounds so easy is so difficult. What does it mean to pray always and not to lose heart? Who among us has never 'lost heart?' Whole groups of people and countless individuals, overlooked, forgotten, disenfranchised, or simply persisting in grinding poverty, lose heart. In fact, it is often those same unshakeable unanswered prayers that cause us to lose heart. Is there a paradox here? The very thing that is given for us not to lose heart – prayer – can in fact cause us to lose heart!

Looking at the parable, we would say the judge is incompetent. In ancient Israel, it was the duty of a judge to maintain harmonious relations and adjudicate disputes between Israelites, in order to re-establish shalom among God's people. One of the duties of ordinary folk was to care for widows and orphans, as in that culture their status implied a degree of practical distress around the necessities of life. They

were to be looked after in the community and for this woman something had gone terribly wrong. She thus went to the only place where she might get help. And to her credit, she does not give in or give up easily and apparently wears him down. So the judge is ultimately ungraciously generous for **his** benefit, not hers.

Over the years in my spiritual and prayer practice, one of the ways I engage scripture is to play with it, and, I am sure in the minds of many, take great liberties with it. With this text, I wondered how the parable might speak to prayer practice beyond the notion of persistence, not that persistence in prayer is not important. So I asked, what does the widow represent in me and maybe you? The widow part of me is vulnerable, feels helpless, alone, often not good enough, all that and more adds up to the sense that 'there is no place for me'. 'She' often shows up in my prayer time, as needy, even whiny and demanding.

Then there is the 'unjust judge.' This is the "inner critic"; the voice that survives from childhood reinforced in education and culture, the voice that says: "who do you think you are; what makes you think you can do this or anything else for that matter" all the while cracking the whip commanding, "go, go, go and don't stop until it is all done – perfectly." This voice shows up in prayer practice as the one who says: "you have far more important things to be doing and you can't do this prayer thing anyway!"

These are the negative traits of the inner widow and unjust judge. Do they have a positive side in relation to my practice of prayer?

Before going there, I want to another step back and explore the word "justice." My Greek/English interlinear translates the word as "avenging" rather than justice. In addition to the notion of "revenge" for "avenging", Webster's dictionary offers the word "liberate." Is it possible that the outcome of persistent prayer is liberation?

The positive aspect of this vulnerable widow brought to prayer is the part of us that longs for union with the Divine. But like the widow pounding on the door of the unjust judge, and Barbara Taylor Brown looking to her God-given clergy role, we often look in the wrong place for what it is we really need. We can think that we will finally be enough, or will have reached a place of inner peace and satisfaction when we have completed the next big task – the degree, ordination, writing the book – whatever it is that we feel will prove our worth in the world. The ungracious world however, is not able to give us what we ultimately need to prevent us from “losing heart”. Actually, the best of the vulnerable inner widow is her persistence in returning again and again to the place of true liberation – her relationship with the divine, the compassionate and generously gracious one.

Is there a positive side to the inner unjust judge? Maybe it is that with time, patience, and practice that critical voice will get tired, give up and be put in it’s proper place, at least most of the time.

So can we understand the parable as a cautionary tale about the practice of prayer? Can we accept that a life of prayer is fraught with uncertainty and unreliability? Richard Foster writes: “The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives – altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure.”<sup>1</sup> So if it is fraught with such difficulty; if we are so obviously inadequate to the task; if most of our prayers are not answered in the way we desire, why not avoid praying altogether?

Or do we somehow know, deep in our being that even in those moments when God seems absent, there is nowhere we can go and be where God is not? The text reads: “God will quickly grant justice.”

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<sup>1</sup>Foster, Richard. Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home. Harper San Francisco.

“We pray because what we really want, above all else and in the deepest places of our being, is to know God. **Whether we know it or not, we long for the presence of God, who is our true home. This is really why we pray.**”<sup>2</sup>

Do you notice the shift from “asking for” to “Living in the embrace of God,” of “being in Being”<sup>3</sup>. According to theologian and social psychologist Joan Chittister, this shift reflects a changing religious world-view. She writes:

“There is only one thing wrong with the traditional definition of prayer; it misrepresents God. ‘Prayer,’ the old teaching said, was ‘the raising of our hearts and minds to God.’ As if God were some regal, distant judge outside ourselves. But science – with its new perception that matter and spirit are of a piece, sometimes particles, sometimes energy – suggests that God is not on a cloud somewhere, imperious and suspecting. **God is the very Energy that animates us.** God is the Spirit that leads us and drives us on. God is the voice within us calling us to life. God is the Reality trying to come to fullness within us, both individually and together. It is to that cosmic God, that personal, inner enkindling God, that we pray.”<sup>4</sup>

Sounds like liberation to me!

My own journey with prayer reflects this change. Notice I said journey. It is a journey that will last the rest of my life – the real journey of a lifetime – and in the words of Thomas Merton, I will ever only be a “beginner at prayer.” For me now, prayer is about making space: making space in our busy lives, and in the larger world for our soul – the part of us that comes from God and returns to God and that seeks communion with the Divine Mystery while we are alive. I have come to understand that my longing for union with the divine is planted in me by the Divine who also longs for me. Ultimately, Prayer is about changing us, changing our perception of the world and possibly changing the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Sittser, page 152-3.

<sup>3</sup> Stella, Tom, The God Instinct, Sorin Books, page 58.

<sup>4</sup> Chittister, Joan, Illuminated life, page 92.

There is a lovely Hasidic story that speaks to the Jeremiah text. A rabbi always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, “why on our hearts and not in them?” The rabbi answered, “Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then **when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.**” Prayer is about changing our hearts.

In the more famous Lucan text on the Lord’s prayer in chapter 11, verse 9, the text reads: “Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you.” We have all stumbled over this text; many have stumbled right out of faith, because as I’ve said, we often do not get what we want. However, reread the text yourself and you will see the last line: “How much more will the Heavenly father give **the Holy Spirit** to those who ask him.” How much more will the One who liberates give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?

So, what are we to ask for? More of God’s Spirit – and truly what could be more liberating than that! What more could any of us want! What are we waiting for, let us pray!