

Bothering God

Luke 18:1-8

January 29, 2023

Thanks to the enviable genius of third grade teachers and the proliferation of procrastination in the mind of a nine year old, we have a new motto in our home. *First things first*. Simple to remember. Easy to repeat. Applicable to almost every situation. Oh, you want to play with your friends? First things first—finish your math homework. Planning some basketball watching before bed? First things first—brush your teeth. Interested in dessert after dinner? First things first—eat what's on your plate.

First things first. Not a bad summary of faith's call on our lives. Many times each day we make decisions, and each of those decisions in its own way discloses our priorities. The accumulation of those seemingly small decisions over a vast span of time sets the course of our lives. Following Jesus asks us to be intentional in setting priorities and persisting in following through on them.

Jesus told a parable so that his disciples would remember to pray always. To pray repeatedly. To pray without ceasing. It's a story about putting first things first.

But it's also a story that might unsettle us. After all, is Jesus really comparing God to a judge who is both unjust and unfaithful? Are our prayers really being equated with the desperate pleas of a powerless petitioner who only receives justice because of her persistent pestering? Is that really the picture of prayer Jesus meant to paint?

Parables tell the truth, but they tell it slant. They describe reality, but they turn it upside down. What is being turned upside down in this provocative story?

Perhaps it would help if we begin at the end. Jesus closes the encounter with a question. That question

hovers in the air as the text ends. The uncomfortable query is left unanswered. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

It seems to me that the parable's answer to the question is "yes, but..." God, whose own faithfulness is steadfast, whose grace is unconditional, whose responsiveness is both quick and steady, will find a measure of faith among us, *but* it will be in unexpected places. In fact, if you zoom out on the Gospel of Luke, the theme is repeated throughout the story. True faith is found over and over again, not among the religious professionals and certainly not those certain of their own righteousness, but among the outsiders, the marginalized, the rejected, the unclean, the ones certain of their sinfulness.

We see it in a widow who refuses to surrender in her fight for justice from the powerful judge. Her action demonstrates a truth confirmed in our own experience. Faith is easy when life is good. It requires little spiritual fortitude to pray when you hold all the cards, when the world is arranged just right for you. In fact, our prayers in such circumstances can easily become lazy, self-righteous, and, perhaps worst of all, performative. More on that next week.

True faith, according to this Sunday's parable, is persisting in prayer when you have reason to doubt your words will have any impact at all. True faith, displayed by our unnamed widow, looks like pouring out your soul in honest petition before God. True faith, in the words of this story, means praying for justice over and over and over again. The widow bothers the judge until he finally relents and gives her what she asks, gives her what is right. Are we instructed to bother God with our prayers?

The widow's example is lifted as a model. What is that model? Persistent prayer, yes. But there is more to this parable. The persistent practice of prayer changes *us*.

Yes, the time we spend in prayer, in the face of promises delayed, long seasons of unsettling silence, even exasperation bordering on hopelessness—that is the time that transforms *us* so that we can hold our prayer's answer when it comes.

In recent years and even in recent days, I have been troubled by the bifurcation of thoughts and prayers on one side and action on the other side. Following incidents of devastating loss, human depravity, and unthinkable evil, a familiar pattern emerges. One set of folks—often in the public eye—tweet, post, and publish their thoughts and prayers for the suffering. Another set—also often in the public eye—decry those thoughts and prayers as ineffectual and purely performative. *Save your thoughts and prayers, we don't want them.* How often have we seen this collision in public discourse? Like so much of life in our time, I'd suggest that we've created an either/or when what is needed is a both/and. Prayer—if it is true prayer—is never restricted to the realm of thought or abstraction. *True prayer is never restricted to the realm of abstraction.* Prayer, described and modeled by Jesus, is itself an act of faith because it drives us more deeply into the needs of those around us. When we pray, we move our feet. People who persist in prayer are also compelled to do something.

The story's widow provides an embodied example of discipleship. Her activism is her prayer. Her prayer is activism. The faith she expresses isn't a passive, disengaged, ethereal wish that things may someday be better.

Now, a confession. This morning's sermon title was chosen way back last summer when I planned worship for the program year, and I thought it a clever confluence of the judge who is bothered into answering the widow and our call to pray without ceasing. But all week long I've been wrestling with another possibility.

What if God is bothered not by the abundance of our prayers but by the emptiness of our words? What if God is bothered by prayers that lack the conviction that leads to action and impact?

One New Testament scholarⁱ says, "To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow...the call to pray...is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of our lives."

In other words, first things first. Prayer helps us with that.

First things first. Do your prayers equip you for another way of life? Are we bold enough to pray for a world turned upside down? Do we have enough courage to pray that our lives might be rearranged by God's priorities? Can we together, can our community, bear witness to the transformation that persistent prayer makes possible? These are heavy questions. They're the consequential questions of faith. How we answer them determines so much.

Every single week, in this space, we gather for worship. And every single week, we offer prayers. We pray out loud, and we pray silently. We pray together, and we pray alone. We pray creative words we craft, and we pray ancient words we repeat. It is, then, I think, a worthy question to ask ourselves: How are all those prayers changing us? What impact do they have? Because it seems to me that if we are here to go through motions, if we leave unchanged, we are only bothering God. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth wrote, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." Can that be true here?

Of course it can. In a few moments we'll do something we do every single Sunday morning. We will pray together these words, "Give us this day our daily bread." When we pray those words, we are praying for sustenance. We are praying for ourselves, yes. But it's more than that. "Give us daily bread." We make that prayer on behalf of all who hunger. All who, like the parable's widow, hunger for righteousness. All who lack daily nourishment. That prayer, if it is

true prayer, must not end when this service is over. Once we have prayed, if we have really prayed for daily bread, our awareness of the hunger in our community must provoke a response. We can't be content with the world as it is when we pray "give us this day our daily bread." And so, each week, in our building, neighbors are offered the sustenance for which we have prayed in the form of bags of groceries to meet their immediate needs. That's important. But the work of our prayers must not end there either. We are called deeper. Over Christmas break, a member of our congregation learned of a need in our neighborhood, that there were families struggling to afford school lunches for their children. And so, on Thursday afternoon, on your behalf, I had the privilege of delivering funds to cover the debt of all students whose families had fallen behind on lunch payments. *You* did that. Why? Because every week you had prayed, "Give us this day our daily bread" and you opened your hearts to make it so.

It's important. It's a start, but it's not enough. Why are our neighbors hungry? Why in God's name is a full-time job insufficient to pay rent and buy groceries to feed your family? You see, our prayers lead us more deeply into the needs that surround us. They keep pushing us to put first things first, to live the words we profess, to go further in our actions on behalf of others.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith among us?

The answer is in our hands.

So, Second Church, let's stop bothering God and pray for transformation. Amen.

ⁱ Alan Culpepper