

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 2022
“Pushy and Persistent” (Luke 18:1-8)

As we have journeyed through the gospel of Luke, we have encountered a number of Jesus’ parables along the way. Again, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. When Jesus tells such stories, it is an invitation for his hearers to change their thinking or to answer a question that has been asked. They are almost always told to reveal a certain dimension of God’s character and how we stand in relationship to God. Today, we arrive at the Parable of the Persistent Widow. Unlike most of his parables, Jesus reveals up front the message it contains.

Jesus has just spoken to his disciples about the coming kingdom. He tells them that after he leaves them and ascends into heaven, life for them will not be so easy. As his followers, they will endure suffering and persecution. They will be discouraged and tempted to throw in the towel. Therefore, they need to be ready for those tough times. So, Jesus tells this parable to encourage them, but introduces it with a summary of what he wants them to hear: that they should be persistent in prayer and not lose heart. He is telling his disciples – and us – that we are to bug and bother God; that we are to be pushy and persistent with God in our prayer life.

We have actually encountered this theme earlier. A number of weeks ago, Jesus told the parable about the friend at midnight. Remember that one? A man has an unexpected guest, but no bread to offer him. He knocks persistently on the door of his neighbor who is already in bed for the night. Jesus concludes the parable by saying that if the neighbor won’t get up and give him the bread out of friendship, he will do so because of the friend’s persistence. Jesus is telling us that we should be pushy and persistent in taking our requests to God in prayer. Then he says, *Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.* Asking, seeking and knocking are examples of being pushy and persistent.

Today’s parable begins with a judge in a certain city who neither feared God nor had respect for people. Judges in that day and time were magistrates appointed by the Romans and were notoriously corrupt. This judge was no exception. Although he was called upon to make decisions and render justice, a plaintiff with no influence or money to buy his way to a verdict, had little hope of ever getting his case settled. Our first character, then, is an immoral judge who can’t be counted on to act out of good character.

Then we have a widow who comes to this judge seeking justice from her adversary – likely someone who is trying to cheat her. In that society, a woman whose husband had died was usually poor because women didn’t inherit property. They had to depend on family and neighbors to care for them and they had no influence in the community. At the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, this widow has no social leverage and no means to pay a bribe. Because she has nothing to offer this judge, he is unconcerned for her and her plight and refuses to give her the justice she seeks.

Although this judge is the only one who can help her, over and over again, he ignores her pleas for his help. He refuses to render justice to one who needs it most. Her only hope is to be persistent. And persistent she is. Not only does she show up at the tent where he holds court,

but she pleads with him in front of his friends and colleagues, confronts him in the streets, and pesters him in the market. Eventually, she wears him down. He gives in because the widow will not give up. *Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not wear me out by continually coming.* You see, it isn't that this judge is filled with compassion and mercy for this woman. It's that he has gotten tired of being beaten down by the bothersome begging of this persistent plaintiff. So, justice is served, even by an unjust judge.

Now, Jesus makes the application of the parable: *Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant them justice.*

This is one of Jesus' *how much more* parables. He tells a bunch of these. He takes a situation in which a certain outcome occurs, and then amps it up by saying, *how much more*, will that be the case with God. For example, *If God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field, how much more will your heavenly Father care for you.* Another example: *If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to you.* And there is the parable referenced earlier: *If you neighbor gives you a loaf of bread at midnight because you keep pounding on the door when he wants to sleep, how much more will your Heavenly Father – who wants you to pray to him at any hour – hear your prayers and grant you what you need.* And that is what Jesus is doing here. He sets up a contrast between the judge and God. If an unjust judge, who must be bribed or pestered, can be persuaded by the poor widow's persistence and perseverance to give in to her requests, how much more can we expect our God, who is a righteous judge and who cares for us, to answer his children who pray to him.

God is nothing like this judge. He doesn't have to be pestered and coerced before he will answer our prayers. Still, Jesus tells us that we ought to be more like this widow who was bugging and bothersome, pushy and persistent. Our prayer life should mirror this woman's perseverance. We are to cry out to God day and night with our petitions.

We find this theme at other places in the Bible, as well. From the book of Romans: *be constant in prayer.* From Ephesians: *pray at all times.* From Colossians: *be steadfast in prayer.* From Thessalonians: *pray constantly.* And again, from Jesus' introduction to today's parable: *pray always and not lose heart.* You see, Jesus knows how easy it is for us to become discouraged and lose heart. Life is not always bright and sunny. It is sometimes filled with dark clouds and pouring rain. There are troubles and tribulations that test our resolve, challenges that overwhelm us, and circumstances that make us weary. Sometimes, we can barely put one foot in front of the other. We just want to climb into bed and pull the covers over our heads because our lives are completely devoid of joy and peace and the road before us seems utterly hopeless.

Jesus knows that what we need to face such times of despondency is an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. We need the assurance that God loves us, has claimed us as his own children, has redeemed us through the blood of his only Son, and stands with us to provide for our needs. And the tool, the resource, we have of maintaining this relationship is prayer. Prayer is our connection to the God who loves us; it is our lifeline. Not only is prayer a way to praise and glorify God; but through this holy conversation, we are able to see God more clearly, are

drawn into a deeper relationship with him, and learn to trust him with our lives – that he will care for us and provide for our needs. God is the only One on whom we can totally depend. He is our hope when we begin to lose heart – and always!

It is no wonder, then, that Jesus, who loves us enough to die for us, encourages us to knock persistently on heaven's door day and night. He wants us to have the peace and contentment an intimate relationship with God brings to our lives. He wants us to know that we can go to God for help in any kind of trouble or petition him with any kind of need. We can take to him our joys and sorrows, our fears and our worries, our hopes and our dreams, And we can be confident that God wants us to pray and promises to hear our prayers. It does not mean, however, that God will grant all our requests. Sometimes the things for which we pray are not in our best interests and the answer to our prayers may be no. However, God, who wants the best for the children he loves, will give us the things we need according to his will and ways.

There will be times, then, when we are disappointed that the prayers we prayed so fervently were not answered or we feel that God is not listening. At such times, we may be tempted to believe that prayer is ineffective and accomplishes little. So, why bother? But remember the widow in the parable. She came to the judge because she expected to win. She had faith in receiving a fair judgment from the judge. So she employed the only weapon she had – persistence. If we don't expect God to answer our prayers, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Jesus encourages us to ask, seek and knock, to continually come to God in prayer. Even though our prayers may not be answered as we hope and expect them to be, time spent in prayer is time well spent because it continues to deepen our relationship with God and increase our faith. So Jesus encourages us to ask, seek and knock, to continually bring God our requests.

But we're not so good at this, are we? I read that American Christians, on average, spend only about four minutes a day in prayer. Jesus encourages us to pray often and always, and we only give four minutes a day. Why is that? For one thing, we're busy. Money and wealth give us so many opportunities to be busy, and unfortunately, when people are busy, one of the first things to go is our prayer life. Maybe we don't feel that we need to pray. We feel that if we believe in God and trust that he is good, then a good God should protect us from the disasters of life. What's more – and I've already alluded to it – we might believe that because our petitions are not answered as we would have them be, that prayer really does no good. Oh, it can be a lovely and beautiful experience, but it doesn't change the mind of God.

But, maybe, the reason most of us don't pray but four minutes a day is because we don't walk closely with God. To have any close relationship, we need to talk often and deeply. We can't have close relationships without persistent, intimate conversation. That's true with marriage, family relationships, friendships, and it's true with God. Four minutes a day is not much intimate conversation with God. That's why Jesus encourages us to come to him often and always.

In fact, we should use Jesus as our example. He was a man of devout prayer. We see, throughout the gospels, the many times Jesus went away to pray. He prayed in good times and challenging times. Through prayer, through an intimate relationship with God, he drew comfort and the strength to carry out his Father's will.

That's what Jesus wants for us. That's why he calls us to bug and bother God with our pushy and persistent prayers. Building an intimate relationship with God will allow us to trust God completely and move us to pray perhaps the best prayer we could pray: Thy will be done. Amen.