

Fully Committed God
Luke 18:1-8
Sermon by Dan Schrock
August 14, 2016

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (NRSV)

I

I know a man who has had a hard life. He and his immediate family members have experienced bipolar disorder, two nasty divorces, long periods of being out of work, chronic physical illness, and a car accident that killed the driver. Because of these chronic conditions and misfortunes, this poor man’s life has often been on the edge. Sometimes he manages—just barely—and sometimes he falls apart.

A while back I was talking to a good Christian woman about this man. She and I have both known him for a long time. In the course of our conversation, she told me she had been praying for him for about 20 years. She said, “For these last 20 years I haven’t seen much change in him. His life is still just as hard as it was 20 years ago. Nothing seems to get better, and sometimes I lose heart. I’m tempted to stop praying for him because it doesn’t seem to do any good.”

Most of us can sympathize with this woman. We too have lost heart in our intercessory prayers. For most of my life I’ve prayed for peace. In the 1970s and 80s I mostly prayed for a halt to the nuclear arms race; in the 1990s I mostly prayed for peace in the Middle East; and since the second Persian Gulf War I’ve prayed for peace in Iraq and Afghanistan. I’ve also prayed for an end to violence in American society. I started praying that in the early 1980s when I lived in Miami, Florida, and witnessed riots between residents and police which were fueled by racial issues. Yet violence seems just as common now as it was in 1980. I’m tempted to lose heart and stop praying. Many of you

have felt this way too, right? You want to give up on intercessory prayer because it doesn't seem to do any good.

II

Losing heart was apparently also a problem for Christians in the first century. Luke says so in 18:1. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." It was easy for Christians to lose heart in the first century. For them the biggest overarching reality was the Roman Empire, with its violence, its idolatry, its worship of the emperor as a god, and its slavery. Intercessory prayers for the coming of God's kingdom sometimes felt futile. The Roman Empire felt so vast, so powerful, and so permanent that Christians could easily lose hope in God.

This was particularly true for people at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. The Roman Empire was rigidly hierarchical. At the pinnacle of the pile was the emperor himself. On the next level down were the senators, a small, tightly-knit class that jealously guarded its privileges. Next was the equestrian class. On down it went, class by class, until you came to peasant widows, who were probably the lowest of all free people. The only people below widows were slaves.

Jesus' parable is about one of these widows on the bottom of the pile. She has no influence and no income. She wants justice in court against some unnamed opponent, but she's at a disadvantage because she has no lawyer and no friends to advocate for her.

What she does have is persistence. She pesters the local judge, again and again and again and again and again. *I want justice against my opponent!* She does what you often have to do in this world to get something changed: make noise and become the squeaky wheel until you get what you want. Make a nuisance of yourself. Write letters to the editor. Round up signatures on a petition. Organize a protest. March in the streets. Lobby officials. Get a proposition on the ballot, then campaign for it like mad. This strategy works for the widow. The judge finally grants her justice just to get rid of her.

III

This is one of the most straight-forward parables Jesus ever told. You don't need detailed Bible study or a seminary degree to get the point because Jesus states it clearly in verses 7 and 8. The point is this: God is not like that corrupt judge. Indeed, God is the exact opposite of that judge. God is not a politician who is preoccupied with getting and keeping power. God is not a bored bureaucrat whose attention you have to capture. You do not have to pester God with your petitions and intercessions until you get what you want. You do not have to persuade God like the widow had to persuade the judge.

Why? Because God is already persuaded. God is already committed to the cause of peace, the cause of justice, and the cause of mercy. For thousands of years now, God has already been dedicated to doing the right thing. God's steadfast loyalty to the cause of peace, justice, mercy, and righteousness began long before you and I were born, and will continue long after we're dead. If there's any persuasion that needs to happen in prayer, then God is the one who has to persuade us of these things, not we who have to persuade God. We are the ones who aren't fully committed to what God wants the world to become. We are the ones whose commitment to justice wavers.

So if the purpose of intercessory prayer isn't to persuade God, then why intercede? If God is already committed to the cause of justice and peace, mercy and righteousness, then why do we bother to pray about these things? I want to outline three reasons.

First, we pray because intercessory prayer keeps converting us to the purposes of God. Many of us in this room are already converted in the sense that we accepted baptism and made an initial commitment to God. Yet our fidelity to God frequently wavers. Our dedication drifts away from God and takes a detour somewhere else. Intercessory prayer prods us to consider what God really wants in the world. It doesn't take much thought to realize that asking God to give your daughter a new Cadillac CT6 sedan is hardly a prayer that lines up with God's passion for justice and peace, righteousness and mercy. Neither does asking God to heal your ailing father, if your motivation in praying that is to be relieved of the inconvenience of visiting him on Sunday afternoons. Intercessory prayer

helps us to consider our motives. Why, in all honesty, am I praying this? Is it for some petty personal reason? Or does it truly fit into God's larger mission in the world?

Every form of prayer that I know about, including intercession, is actually a response to what God has already done. God is the one who has taken the initiative to create the world and sustain it with love. Everything out there in this wide world is a direct or indirect result of God's initiative. If God had not taken this initiative, creation would not exist, human civilization would not exist, and none of us would exist. Prayer is one way we respond to God's initiatives. It's a way for us to joyfully link up with what God has already done in the world. It's a way for us to join hands with God. In prayer we are drawn back toward God and reconverted to want what God wants.

Second, we pray because intercession strengthens our relationship with God. A few weeks ago at the supper table, Jenny and I got into a wide-ranging conversation. For 75 minutes we bounced from one topic to another: the new carpet we need for several rooms in our house, our two sons, the challenges of teaching college and seminary students, the various mentoring relationships we've had, the processes of church life, where we do and don't see spiritual transformation happening, and what the nature of transformation is and isn't. When we finally stood up from the table, we agreed it was a wonderful conversation that blessed our relationship. Well, that's what prayer does, not just intercession but other forms of prayer too. Prayer blesses our relationship with God. When we pray with authentic trust and love, it enriches our friendship with God.

Third, we pray because intercession makes us more compassionate. If I pray for you, and if I do it with integrity, it will gradually soften my heart. I will take a deeper interest in you. I will have more patience with you. This is why Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies in Matthew 5:44. If you and I only pray for our friends, but never for our enemies, then we have not yet embraced the wideness of intercessory prayer. Our society is stressed with intense animosity between Republicans and Democrats, between citizens and immigrants, between whites and people of color. Intercessory prayer may or may not help us find common solutions, but it has a good chance of helping us become compassionate. That would be no small thing.

IV

One more thing. In verse 8, Jesus says God will “quickly” grant justice to people who cry out in prayer. A lot of us want to ask: really? Most of the time it doesn’t look like God is “quickly” granting justice to anyone. Most of the time it looks like God isn’t doing anything at all. Perhaps we can try to remember that God operates with a different sense of time than we have. Our sense of time arises from the span of a human life, maybe 70, 80, 90 years. For us quick means tomorrow, or at least next week. But God’s sense of time arises from eternity, because God lives in perpetuity. The difference in timeframes means that what is quick for God seems slow to us. “Quick” for God might be a thousand years. As best as we can estimate, the universe is 13.82 billion years old.¹ Compared to that, a human lifespan lasting 90 years amounts to the quiver of an eyelid.

V

In this parable, Jesus tries to transform our understanding of intercessory prayer. We don’t worship a depraved judge who needs to be pestered and persuaded until he gives in. We worship a God who has already unleashed the mission of justice and peace, righteousness and mercy. We worship a God who is already working for these things on our behalf. God invites us—now—to join this grand project through our prayers, our service, and our love. So don’t lose heart. God is fully committed.

¹ Phil Plait, “The Universe is 13.82 Billion Years Old,” *Slate*, March 21, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad_astronomy/2013/03/21/age_of_the_universe_planck_results_show_universe_is_13_82_billion_years.html, accessed July 22, 2016.