

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Parable of the Persistent Widow”

Rev. David K. Groth

October 16, 2022

“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

Not one of us prays like we know we should. There are plenty of reasons why. We’re too busy, too distracted. Or we’re too proud; we think we can handle it. Or we’re too tired and keep falling asleep. Or we’re too guilty; maybe we’ve been indulging ourselves in bad behavior and it doesn’t feel right to come before Holy God in prayer. Perhaps we’re not confident prayer will work. After all, we’ve already prayed about something at least a dozen times and nothing has changed. Perhaps we think God already knows what we need, so what’s the point of telling him? Perhaps we think God has a predetermined and fixed blueprint for our lives and we’re just running down the unchangeable paths He has assigned to us.

Whatever the reason, it doesn’t hold water. It does not stand up against the first words of our text, “Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

There are just two characters in this parable. First there is this widow. What do we know about the typical widow in 1st century Palestine? We know she cannot work; she cannot make an income. We know there is no social security safety net for her. So, as soon as her husband died, she became a dependent on whatever family member could take her in. If she had no one to take her in, she would have to resort to begging.

Widows were usually poor. Being poor, widows lacked influence. A widow is the easiest person for this judge to ignore. She certainly cannot bribe him to take her case. Being poor, she will also be the first and the last to feel the effects of famine in the land, or warfare, or inflation, or bad government.

We know that God has a special concern for the widows and orphans. Exodus 22, “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless” (v. 22).

What do we know about this judge? He’s corrupt. He’s aloof. He’s hard-hearted. He’s arrogant. He feels he is the law of the land, accountable to no one, not even God. He says himself he “neither fears God nor cares about man.” Jesus calls him “unjust”. I would use the word “worthless.”

This widow means nothing to him because he sees no benefit to himself to take on her case. Justice means nothing to him. Therefore, the only weapon this widow has is persistence. She decides she’s going to pester him every day and wear him down. She knows sooner or later he’ll have to cave, if only to get rid of her. So, sure as sunrise, every day she comes to pay her respects to the judge.

Persistence is the strength of the weak and this widow is weak. She’s also a very ordinary person. Only her persistence stands out, which means we can all identify with her. Most of us are ordinary people too, but every one of us has at least the capacity for persistence.

This widow reminds me of Winston Churchill’s words in October of 1941, a time when England stood mostly alone against the Nazis, outmanned, outgunned. He said, “This is the lesson: never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

Perseverance, tenacity, persistence! Instead of preparing our children for success, maybe we would do better to prepare them to cope with failure, for when things don’t turn out right. Maybe we should be nursing along their capacities for persistence rather than forever trying to fix things for them.

Luke 18:1 “Jesus told them a parable to show them that they should always pray and not lose heart.” Someone said you don’t know what prayer is unless you have stood at the door knocking until your knuckles are a bloody mess.

In the Bible, God nearly begs us to pray. But why? I think it’s because He knows we suffer unnecessarily when we do not pray. Not everything is fixed and we are not puppets to fate. We can change the mind of God with our prayers! We can change our circumstances. We can make someone else’s life better with our prayers. Not everything is etched in stone. Prayer changes things. It is not an exercise in futility.

God wants to hear our advice, promises to listen, and promises to answer every time. It may not be the answer that you want, but we know it will be good because we know He is good and because we know He wants what is best for you. In the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvoux said, "God will give you what you ask for or something better."

Jesus told this parable to teach us we "ought always to pray and not lose heart." Praying must be good for us. How can it be good for us if He says no to our prayers? Well, the very act of praying certainly reminds us of who He is and who we are. We are His creatures. He is our Creator.

To be told no again and again certainly teaches us something about patience and perseverance. It builds inner strength and character and grit. To be told no again and again may help align our will with God's.

What is a person to do when even prayer fails them? The answer of this parable is you keep praying. You don't throw in the towel. You persist. And you keep trusting in Him even when He does not give you what you think you need. With this parable God invites us to nag and pester Him. Maybe Paul was thinking of this widow when he told the church in Thessalonica, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17).

And the big promise is: always, always, always the Lord will hear and answer. Consider how Jesus stopped whatever He was doing to answer the prayers of a crippled man, a blind man, a leper, a possessed person.

If the Bible teaches us anything it teaches us the Lord intervenes in human history and in our personal histories, often because of our prayers. Not everything is predetermined. If a cold, heartless judge will hear the case of an insignificant widow, how much more so will our merciful Father hear our prayers. If this worthless judge will give way to the unrelenting pressure of the widow out of the selfish desire to be rid of her, how much more so will our gracious and compassionate God answer the prayers of children He loves!

This crusty old judge was arrogant. Our God is humble.

He was aloof. Our God is very near, very accessible, very approachable.

He was unjust. Our God promises He is just and merciful and gracious.

He was slow to listen. Our God is always ready to listen.

The judge had a "what's in it for me" sort of attitude, whereas our God laid down His life for us on the cross.

With this parable, Jesus seems to say, "I know sometimes how I may appear to you, but I'm not like this judge. I love you. I care for you. I have laid my life down for you. If I don't give you what you ask for in prayer, there are good reasons. Trust me: it is what you would want for yourself, if only you knew all the details."

Sometimes I ask my confirmands to imagine what it would be like trying to get hold of the President of the United States to lodge a complaint. And yet our all-powerful, all-loving God is there ahead of us, already listening, whenever we turn our attention to him in prayer.

Similarly, you can pay celebrities to record and send a simple birthday greeting. Prices start at about \$75 bucks and go up to \$2500. But we get to pray to our God who knows us and loves us. He answers our prayers, and it doesn't cost a penny.

So "Take it to the Lord in prayer," and keep taking it to the Lord in prayer, because there is one who hears your prayers and one who welcomes your hopes and aspirations, your fears and anxieties, your confessions, your gratitude. Claim the promise of this parable for yourself, that God will always hear your prayers and answer them.

Put your confidence in something that works. It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you. It is God to whom you can turn when you have exhausted all the alternatives. It is God on whom you can call when you get that fateful diagnosis. It is God who will see you through those seasons of doubt and despair. It is God on whom you can depend as you draw your last breath.

Do not give up on prayer. Do not lose heart. Persistence is what you must have when you have hardly anything else. And when you don't have even that, you have a God who created and redeemed you, a God who loves and forgives you and has planned a future for you.

Pray and keep on praying to your Father in heaven "who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all." As Paul asks, if He was willing to do that for us, "How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Amen.