

October 16, 2016

Luke 18:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke is the only gospel writer that includes this parable about the widow and unjust judge. I always find it interesting when only one of the four gospel writers includes a particular story and the other three choose not to. What was it about that that prompted him to tell it to his community? While we can't go back in time and ask Luke we can speculate a bit. It has long been suggested Luke was a traveling physician. If that is the case, then perhaps Luke knew exactly the power prayer had in bringing healing. Now before we move on, we must define what exactly is healing? I imagine many people will automatically feel a disconnect upon hearing prayer has the power to bring about healing. Their experience has proven otherwise. Perhaps they themselves, a loved one, or a friend did not recover from an illness. Where is the power of prayer at work they might ask? Because, in our society, we almost automatically connect the word healing to a cure from a physical ailment it would be all too easy, when a cure does not come, to be angry at God and deem God failed to hear one's prayers for healing. It would be even easier to become despondent, doubt the effectiveness of prayer and God's presence in the midst of an illness when confronted with a theological statement that stated, "Well, you just didn't pray enough." Though well intended, this statement can cause a great deal of pain for those who didn't experience a physical

cure. Were they somewhat at fault in their loved one dying? Were they somehow to blame in not being cured of whatever ails them? Many people hear these statements and deem them to be true and thus never experience the compassionate and loving God revealed in Jesus Christ. They don't encounter a God who comes to the aid of God's people. They instead encounter quite the opposite God and may eventually deem they have no need of church or of God. Healing is not a cure. Henry French, in his book *Prayer a Primer* defines healing this way:

You are healed when your mind and spirit are at peace with what's happening to your body. So much illness and injury are accompanied by mental and spiritual anguish, by fear, by anger and bitterness, by loneliness, by confusion, by religious doubt and despair, by a strong resistance to accepting and coming to terms with what's going on with you. Healing comes with an acceptance of what's happening, and the trust that even if I die, yet shall I live. (John 11:25-26) When healing has happened, people are at peace with themselves, with their family and friends, and with God.ⁱ

Thus, perhaps in a day long before modern medicine Luke, the physician, relied on prayer to bring about healing when he knew there was nothing else he could do.

Additionally, perhaps Luke includes this story because his community was enduring something that was testing their faith. It was testing their ability to trust in the power of prayer. It was testing their confidence in God to act and deliver them from whatever it was they were experiencing. More than likely, what they were encountering was resistance due to their faith. Resistance in the form of persecution. Luke may have witnessed first-hand that many were losing hope and even falling away from faith in the living God. In response, he recalls this parable and proclaims it to his

community to assure them God is listening. They may have resonated with the widow feeling vulnerable, alone, and desperate. They may have even come to view God as the unjust judge showing no compassion for God's people. And thus Luke tells them that if this unjust judge finally relents and shows justice to this widow, how much more will God hear the cries of God's people and act? Act with justice. Act with love. Act with compassion. Luke, writing some 50 to 60 years following the resurrection of Jesus and, along with his community, fully expecting the imminent return of Jesus is probably watching a community, in the midst of persecution, also struggling with questions of whether Jesus will ever return or not. This is most likely why he ends this passage with a question, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Finally, a third possibility of why Luke might have included this parable. Luke, much more so than the other gospel writers, speaks to discipleship. While clearly informing the reader of who Jesus was and the significance of His coming, death and resurrection a secondary theme in Luke is discipleship; that is:

Discipleship is a way of life as a member of the repentant and saved people of God. For Luke, one is not a disciple alone, but one finds profound personal significance in becoming one of the people of God who live as citizens of God's kingdom in a manner consistent with God's intentions for the life of all humanity as brought and taught, shown and known in Jesus Christ, God's Son, the universal Savior of humankind.ⁱⁱ

Prayer is a way of life modeled by Jesus and prayer is to be a way of life for his followers; that is, his disciples. Prayer is a gift from God to keep us connected to God and it is entirely possible Luke was witnessing his community become disconnected from God.

They were growing weary. John Wesley, in his commentary on the New Testament, phrases “weariness” in regards to prayer in the sense that if our prayers are not getting results why bother.ⁱⁱⁱ Why continue to pray? Why continue to have faith God will hear them? I suspect all of us have encountered this weariness in our lives of prayer individually and communally. But Jesus tells us to not grow weary. As the Apostle Paul writes we are called to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and to “pray in the Spirit...and always preserve in supplication...” (Ephesians 6:18). This is exactly what the widow emulates in our gospel text through her tenacity and determination.

In the midst of whatever it is God’s people are experiencing, Jesus (and subsequently Luke) reveal that prayer is believing God will act. We must never give up or lose heart because ultimately the power of God’s love, compassion, justice and mercy will prevail. In a sermon on this passage, Bishop Larry Goodpaster, concludes with words which bring the relevancy of Jesus’ teaching into our own context:

Prayer is an act of trust which reorders our priorities and helps us to see and to live into a different future. In a world with fear, prejudice, hatred, violence, we need to be living faithfully, boldly, tenaciously as people of faith who pray and strive for God’s Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. As we do, we will discover that we have unleashed the power of prayer to make a difference in our lives and to help shape a different world.^{iv}

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ! Amen.

ⁱ Henry F. French; *Prayer a Primer* (Augsburg, 2009) p. 67

ⁱⁱ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 95 New Testament.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from a sermon by Bishop Larry Goodpaster, www.textweek.com/yearc/properc24.htm

^{iv} Ibid.