

Luke 18:1-8
October 20, 2019

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

It was May 2007 and I had just concluded my first year of seminary and began next phase of the journey toward ordination – 11 weeks as a hospital chaplain. With little time to catch my breath from a rather exhausting year of study, I found myself quickly tossed into a turbulent environment and within the first few weeks had witnessed illness and death in all its various forms and it seemed all the prayers I had said over the last few weeks with patients and their loved ones were falling on deaf ears. Slowly I was overcome by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

Then, one day I walked into a room in the ICU where I found a woman holding the hand of her daughter lying in bed connected to all sorts of tubes, wires and monitors. Her daughter - pale, thin, and seemingly lifeless - had been in the hospital for nearly 3 months with a host of medical conditions and complications. This mother sat faithfully at her side praying hour after hour, day after day and upon that first visit, invited me to pray with her. As the weeks went by, I realized my studies hadn't really stopped, but had just continued beyond a classroom and instead of a professor doing the teaching it was now this faithful disciple caught in the very midst of life in the flesh.

She had questioned why early on. She had been brought deep down into the valley where she felt alone, lost, and without voice. But she continued to pray and in time came to the realization prayer did indeed have power. She could pour out her tears, pain, hopelessness and frustrations to God and somehow, somehow the Holy Spirit transformed them into a sense of peace and well-being, strength, hope and the ability to be present for her ailing daughter. Prayer also opened her eyes to see God was not out to get her or her daughter but rather see God was present in the doctors, nurses, and the many friends and family that visited her and even in me, the first-year seminary student and chaplain

wrestling with why bad things happen to good people. It was as if prayer was as important as every breath of life she took, instilling in her the strength to not lose heart.

Jesus knew a little something about the need for prayer and he teaches his disciples to “pray always and not to lose heart.” He then teaches with a parable about a judge – powerful and without regard for God or for the people; and a widow – the exact opposite of the judge – vulnerable, powerless, and seemingly without voice. Perhaps, she sat alongside a dusty road where she kept watch each day for the judge to approach and then would cry out in prayer for mercy and justice. It would have been all too easy for her to have given up. How could her seemingly insignificant cries for help change a thing?

We face times in our life when it seems we just can’t move forward. Like the widow, we cry out and our pleas seem to go unheard. We look for God, but our eyes are clouded by the pain and evil in the world. I’ve been there. I suspect you’ve been there as well. At a place where we begin to lose heart and wonder if anyone is really listening. Is God listening?

But Jesus promises the prayers of the faithful are not offered in vain and Jesus prayed continuously as he journeyed toward the cross. Luke presents to us example after example:

- “Now when all the people were baptized, and when **Jesus** also had been baptized and was **praying**, the heaven was opened” – Luke 3:21
- “But **He** (Jesus) would withdrawal to deserted places and **pray**.” – Luke 5:16
- “Now during those days **He** went out to the mountain to **pray**; and **He** spent the night in **prayer** to God.” – Luke 6:12
- “**Jesus** took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to **pray**.” – Luke 9:28

- “Then **He** withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and **prayed**... – Luke 22:41-42

We pray because Jesus prayed, and because he commanded his followers to do the same. We pray because, like faith, it's a wonderful gift from God. Surely, prayer brought Jesus comfort, peace, and the strength needed to remain faithful to God's will and his prayers from the cross were answered Easter morning when he arose to new life. There is another instance of prayer we find only in Luke's gospel offered from one of the criminals hung alongside Jesus who states, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus response is as sure now as it is was then, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:42-43)

We are called by a faithful, loving, and life-giving God to a life of discipleship, which may be fraught with many ups, downs, hills and valleys. There will be challenges. There will be pain. But we faithful disciples pray. Alone. Together when you gather as the church here at Trinity. Together when the people of Bethany gather in West Branch. Together alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ of the Southeastern Iowa Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Together as the body of Christ, the church on earth. Together, with the widow, the lepers on the side of the road, the blind beggar whom others pass by, the criminal from the cross, the mother in the ICU, the chaplain wondering where God is at and why there is suffering in the world, the farmer praying for favorable weather and a bountiful harvest in order to pay the bills and provide for his family, the mother praying following a miscarriage, the student praying she won't get bullied today, the employee whose just learned his job will be eliminated, the refugee wondering where his children will lay their weary heads tonight or find their next meal tomorrow, the wife hoping she won't endure the damaging words and painful blows of her abusive spouse, the addict praying for the strength not to take one more drink, the prisoner praying for hope, and we pray together, with Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

We journey forward praying persistently trusting our prayers are heard and as we do, something happens. As Soren Kierkegaard states, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him [or her] who prays." Prayer opens us up as we let down our guard and the walls we erect to protect ourselves thus becoming vulnerable and placing everything in God's hands. Prayer is our recognition we can't go it alone and need that which God freely provides. Prayer sustains, comforts, brings peace and turns us from the negative, the evil in the world, and turns us to God all the while opening our eyes to see God's goodness and presence when previously we could not. Seeing God is not like the unjust judge; but rather seeing God, as the Psalmist poetically pens, is where our help comes from. God is creator and keeper. God is our shade. God is our protector. God is love! Seeing God in Jesus, the One who gives his life so that we might live.

The widow in our text might not have had anything to her name – no possessions, no rights, no status, nothing. Yet she had a voice, she had faith and she had persistence. Initially, the mother in the hospital had very little as she struggled daily to cope with her daughter's illness. Yet, she had the gift and power of prayer that God heard and answered. At times in our life of faith it may seem we have very little but it is also at times like this that if we truly look around we realize how richly blessed we are. God has provided us with so much that our oft clouded eyes deem as tiny and insignificant or can't perceive at all. Yet, this parable and the Biblical story give witness to how God can make possible what we deem impossible. God can use very little to transform into multitudes. One tiny voice can bring about change. One small prayer can bring hope and the strength to not lose heart. The mother's prayer not only sustained her, but her witness was also the much-needed answer to my prayers that equipped me to not lose heart.

Let us pray. Lord, may our prayers be heard and give us the strength to not lose heart. Help us trust confidently your Son is always near - leading, guiding, and loving us day after day after day. Amen.