

Travel Stories: *The Widow* - wk 9

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Sept. 13, 2020
Luke 18:1-8 *The Message* paraphrase (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're continuing our message series today looking at some of Jesus' conversations. These are the Travel Stories are stories Jesus told, while walking along and participating in the common things of life. As a main resource for this series, I've been drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*.

Before I became a pastor I had a career as a headhunter for commercial real estate executives. Our company would help find executives to fill vacancies for commercial real estate finance and development positions. As I learned the work from my boss, he said something that stuck with me. He said, *In life people often have three things: family, faith, and career. And some people don't have family and some people don't have a faith.* That meant some executives we talked with only had their career. My boss said this, because he wanted to be careful that if they didn't get the new job we were showing them, that they wouldn't be crushed and that they could return to doing their current job well.

To me that speaks to what we want out of life and what we ask for in prayer. Often our prayers have to do with career and family. Health of family, personal health, growth of career, finding new work. But foundational to these and

not to be missed is opening our hearts in faith to enjoy the One we pray to.

Let me ask you a question: If you were told with assurance that God would never make you wealthy, successful, or heal you of an ailment, would you have any reason left to pray? Many would say “No,” because that’s all they’ve wanted or what they’ve been told to ask for. But when you receive the revelation of God as Father who loves you with a never-ending, unconditional love, and welcomes you into an eternal family, then enjoying that loving relationship becomes more important than any other reason to pray. In fact, enjoying that loving relationship is persevering in prayer.

Our loving relationship with God is then what is constant amidst the ups and downs of life. Now let me be clear, there’s no prescribed way you need to experience this relationship. Just like all your relationships are different, your relationship with God will be personally yours and therefore different than how others experience God.

I’ve heard it said every person is a vessel that needs to be filled with the life and love of God. We were created for enjoying this loving relationship with God. But how often do we limit that relationship to coming to God with our petitions, asking for what we want. Because God wants what’s best for us, we can persist in these petitions, but while we persist, we can also open the door of our hearts to enjoy God relationally.

In the Bible we see a lot of people praying, but there's very little written on the topic of prayer. In Luke there are two Travel Stories that have to do with prayer. The first, we looked at in Luke 11 was the story of the friend knocking at the friend's door at night. It put prayer in the ordinariness of asking for bread for the friend who came at the inconvenient time of mid-night. Everything about the story was personal and relational with terms like "friend," "child/children," and our "Father". Prayer then involves personal language relating to our Heavenly Father and we can without hesitation ask for what we need. The Father is our friend. Prayer is personal.

The second Travel Story in Luke about prayer is today's story. It is quite different. Here there is no emphasis on the personal. Interesting, right? The story is about a widow petitioning an impersonal judge. It's not showing two neighbors who are on easy, friendly terms with one another, asking for what one needs. It's a story of an impersonal court of law where there was no relationship, only a matter of justice. In today's story, we have a nameless widow and a faceless judge.

But a common thread links these two stories. The first story mentions the "persistence" of the friend asking for bread, and the second emphasizes our **"need to pray always and not to lose heart."** **"Not to lose heart"** in this story parallels **"persistence"** in the first.

As we are coming close to the end of these Travel Stories, maybe this aspect of prayer needs to be given some emphatic bold print. **“Not to lose heart.”** Prayer after all is a matter of opening our heart to a loving relationship with God. Prayer is fundamentally necessary for the life of faith. Prayer is not retreating from life; it is part of life at all times and all places. Jesus’ story showed His listeners it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit.

This widow was in need of justice. Someone had wronged or defrauded her. She had no one who was rich or powerful or influential enough to stand up for her. She had *“nothing but a prayer,”* we might say. She went to the village judge and asked for help. There were laws she could appeal to, but the impersonal judge ignored her.

Most people, maybe all, at one time or another, pray. And many - *who knows how many?* - quit. And why shouldn’t they? If they don’t get what they ask for, if they don’t get what they think is as an “answer” to their prayer - why keep at it? The remarkable thing about prayer is not that so many people pray, but that some of us keep at it. Why do we keep at it? Why do we keep praying when we have so little to show for it? Anyone who has made a practice of prayer knows the feeling, overwhelming sometimes, that prayer is like a leaky bucket. You go to the river to get a pail of water and by the time you get home the water is gone, the bucket is empty, and all there is left but a damp trail behind you that will soon be dry.

Little wonder that Jesus concluded his story with the memorable phrase, “**And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?**” Which is to say, “Will he find men and women who are still praying, who have not given up, who have not closed their hearts?”

The widow in Jesus’ story refused to quit. Eugene Peterson describes her actions, *She kept after him. She pounded on his door in the middle of the night. She accosted him in the street. She badgered him relentlessly. He felt like he had bruises all over his face and two black eyes (the literal meaning of the verb, hupopiadzo) from her pummeling. Finally, he gave in. He gave her the justice she asked for.*

This widow’s story is a story about prayer: we “**need to pray always and not to lose heart**” (Luke 18:1 NRSV); it is necessary “**to pray consistently and never quit**” (The Message).

The reality is that those who stick it out in this life of prayer have learned how to handle what our might feel like or be interpreted as God’s non-response, God’s silence.

God’s silence in the face of our prayers is not due to some inadequacy on our part, or choosing the wrong words to pray with. **God’s silence is actually a common and repeated experience among all who pray.** Consider the Psalms: it could probably be called the official prayer book for how to pray. These are the prayers of God’s people and it turns out that God’s silence was part of their prayer

life. People who pray persistently are actually deeply experienced in God's silence and ok with it.

Consider Psalm 10 and 13 among many others. Psalm 10:1, **Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?** Psalm 13:1-2, **How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, And have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**

“Why, why why?” “How long, how long, how long?”

People who pray, know what it is like to hear nothing in response. People who pray, don't get what they ask for when they ask for it. People who pray, ask “How long?” and “Why?” a lot. People who pray, keep praying despite the silence of God.

We know the Psalmists kept praying because we have their prayers written. And generation after generation continued to pray and sing these same psalms, praying and singing the “Why?’s” and “How long?’s” Praying and singing through the silences. Praying like the persistent widow who did not lose heart.

So why persist? Why do we do keep praying? Why do we continue praying, when we don't get all that we ask for? Good questions.

People who pray and keep on praying, do so because we know who God is and what He is like: *a good, rescuing, welcoming God*. God is the One who made the cosmos and said that it was “very good.” God is the One who saved men and women lost in the world’s ways and desperately in need of filling with His love. God is the One who called a people to be a “**kingdom of priests**” (Exodus 19:6) and a “**light to [all] peoples**” (Isaiah 51:4). People who pray and keep on praying do so because they know God’s ways and could write a book about it for the whole earth to read. A book calling people to open their hearts to Jesus and to join in the celebration and experience life with God through prayer.

We pray because God is a good God, and rescuing, and welcoming. This revelation about God is given in story after story after story over nearly two thousand years in the Bible. The stories all take place with named people and named places. They are all personal and local. And through opening our hearts, whole-heartedly opening our hearts to our Father in heaven, He thoroughly involves Himself in every detail of our lives. You, I’m sure, have some stories of God you could write about.

Now if God is personal, why don’t we get immediate answers with quick results? If God is personal, why then is God sometimes silent? I think it’s because we never really ever get to know the whole story of God and all the good that God is doing. We never get to know the whole story, for it is too large and complex. We probably only get

a chapter or two in our lifetimes. There are mysteries in life we will never comprehend. How could we? And besides, a god we can understand is not God. But what of the mysteries in life? Are they bad mysteries? Are they cause for concern? No, the mysteries are good, not ominous. They are the mysteries we encountered when God is silent, but God is not at all impersonal or disinterested. God is still at work for our good and the bringing of His Kingdom.

Consider the widow's story again. When we know the love of God personally, when we could write the *Gospel According to fill in your name*, then we know this story's description of the impersonal, evil judge is not God. It's a sketch of everything that God is *not*. Because we have all these generations of personal God-stories, all these songs and prayers and reflections, we can recognize at once that this judge is an evil parody of God. Not God.

Having kept company with Jesus along the Way as He tells these Travel Stories, we now know the character of God is good. The God we relate to and pray to is good, rescuing, and welcoming. That revelation of God come to us is why we keep praying and do not lose heart. Why we keep praying is because we know that God is everything that the evil judge is not. God is personal and caring. We know that silence of God does not mean God is indifferent.

When we talk to God, we tell God what we want, yes, absolutely. But after we've shared what we want, prayer

doesn't stop there. That's just the first five seconds of our relationship with God. Persistence in prayer is then about enjoying the love of God and communing with Him. Taking time to enjoy God. You name what that is for you: is it walking on a nature trail, is it looking up at the night sky, is it enjoying a meal with those you love and knowing God is smiling on your communion?

What we ask for may not turn out to be what we thought we needed, that's another factor, but the relationship we enjoy through prayer is what perseverance in prayer is about. Not getting what we need to be honest, we only know what we think we need, but we need the most is a relationship with God filling us with His Holy Spirit.

You know, if we persist in our petitions, without opening our hearts to God filling us, then our persistence just might be a cover for stubborn willfulness. It's saying "my will be done." But when persistence in prayer is open to the wider margins of God's great story of rescue and love for us, open to the mysteries we don't know everything about. When persistence in prayer brings us into relationship with God, then through persistence in prayer we enjoy God's welcome every day of our lives. That is what we most need. Persistence in prayer limited to a list of requests is not much of a relationship and I can see why people would quit. But having been called Jesus' friends, prayer is so much more than listing needs and wants.

How do we live in a persistent story larger than wealth, health, or career? How do we know there is more hope for the world than what we see on Evening News? It is only through connecting with God through whole hearted prayer.

Now if you have difficulty coming to God with an open heart. It just might feel too risky, you're not sure if God is like that impersonal judge or really loving like Jesus says He is. If you can't handle the thought of whole hearted prayer, then I invite you to pray this prayer from John Eldredge, "*Jesus catch my heart.*" You know these are difficult times in the world, there is so much going on at once. "*Jesus catch my heart.*"

We were created for a loving relationship with God. We are empty vessels needing to be filled. We see the ways the world offers to fill us, but we see it always fails to work. We find any number of things, but we were created for one relationship at the center of the universe. Jesus invites us to live free, freely able to bring to God all our desires in prayer and freely invited to let God fill us with all He knows we need. Freely allowed to enjoy our lives knowing God is with us.

God filling us with His life, His love, and His Holy Spirit, is then the final answer to our prayers. It's that relationship with God through prayer. There's no getting around the fact that life is an adventure and we only see it through a

small window. But God who sees the big picture says we're made to enjoy this life with Him. Good news.

We persist in daily prayer then, not as formula, not as duty, but to open our hearts to the love of God. You know, in this adventure we call life, it's a choice we make to let God in. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."**

How do you unlock a door? You unlock the door from the inside.

The widow approached an impersonal judge who didn't care about her and she engaged in a legal process. That's not what God is like. That's not what we do in prayer. Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts to fill us with the personal love of the Father and says prayer is how we enjoy that relationship, when we open the door of our hearts. Prayer is enjoying God.

Would you pray with me?

Thank you God that you don't offer us an on again, off again, relationship. Thank you that persistence in prayer is enjoying a relationship with you everyday. Thank you that you are always present by your Holy Spirit and always desire to give us the good of life and the promise of eternal life in your Kingdom of Heaven. In Jesus name, Amen.