

Sermon: Prayer or Justice

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, October 16, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The people of God pray. Prayer is what we do as a community of faith. The Bible reveals to us that from the time of prehistory, the time of Seth when “people began to invoke the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26), to the culmination of history in Revelation, the people of God pray. The Bible itself contains nearly fifty lengthy prayers in prose, and several hundred shorter prayers in poetic form. The entire book of Psalms are essentially prayers.

Prayer is, at the most basic level, a simple and direct act of communicating with God. Ordinary words for speech and conversation are often employed during prayer, words such as spoke, say, call, or cry. Thus prayer is often seen as conversational and relational. The act of praying is essentially humankind addressing God who seeks relationship with the people of God. Therefore prayer is central and essential to our faith.

Would it then surprise you that Jesus taught very little about prayer? Don't get me wrong, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus prayed often. He seems to have a true need to pray, to communicate with his Father in heaven. In the Gospel accounts, he seems to be always going off somewhere private, just so he could have some quiet time with God, just so he could pray.

Yet, there is surprisingly very little teaching by Jesus on how one ought to pray. Yes, I know you are going to say, “how about the Lord's prayer?” I suppose Jesus did teach his disciples (and us) on how to pray, but that initiative did not come from Jesus. In fact, according to Luke 11, it was one of the disciples who demanded, “*Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.*” John, of course, was John the baptizer, a contemporary of Jesus who had collected also a band of disciples to himself. It would seem that while John taught his disciples on the intricacy of praying to God, Jesus had neglected to do the same. In response to the request of his disciple, Jesus provided a few lines of prayer as example, he then quickly moved on to the story about two friends, where one persisted in asking the other for three loaves of bread during midnight.

All that is to set the stage for the passage in Luke 18, our Scripture reading for today, when Jesus told the disciples about the need to pray always and not to lose heart. He taught them by a parable of a nameless widow facing a heartless judge. This judge, according to Jesus, presided in a certain city and he neither feared God nor had respect for people. That is an utmost dangerous combination as the lack of feared for God renders one immoral, and the lack of respect for people renders one unethical. A judge who is both immoral and unethical would most certainly pervert justice, and most certainly perverting it for his own sake.

Yet, he is a judge, with power and authority unthinkable to commoners, and certainly unimaginable to a lonely poor widow. Without a husband to provide for her needs, and without a male kin to protect her legal interest, a widow in the ancient world is truly vulnerable. The contrast between the two is salient, as this nameless widow came to this heartless judge, not once or twice, but repeatedly, pleading and crying out in verse 3, *“Grant me justice against my accuser.”* The imperative verb in Greek uses by the widow is ἐκδικέω (ekdikeó), which should really be translated as to vindicate or to avenge.

Just so we are clear about her intention: vengeance is what she seeks. She had been wronged by her adversary, most likely in the context of a dispute in the court of law. We are not sure if injustice had truly been done to her, and we are not sure if this heartless judge was somehow involved. But we are certain this widow felt that she was wronged, and she sought vindication from the one who has power. To her, she sought justice.

At first, the judge ignored her, refusing to entertain her plea, but she kept on coming, unrelenting. She might have pounded on his door at night, accosted him in the street, embarrassed him in front of his esteemed friends. So the judge said to himself in verse 5, *“Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”*

The term ‘wear me out’ in Greek is ὑπωπιάζω (hupópiázō), which literally means to ‘strike under the eye’, or in the boxing term ‘to give someone an upper cut’. The picture painted here is not a nagging old lady badgering a judge. No, the picture painted here, with such a colourful use of word, is actually that of a pair of worthy opponents locked in a bitter struggle, with the outcome far from certain.

Facing such a worthy opponent, this heartless judge relented, and granted this nameless yet relentless widow the justice due her. *"Listen to what the unjust judge says"*, implores Jesus, with the following rhetorical question in verse 7-8, *"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."* A parable about prayer, about being persistent in prayer at first turns out to be really about justice, about God granting justice to those who cry out to God.

Nevertheless, is Jesus really comparing God to this unjust judge? Is Jesus teaching us to badger God with unrelenting petition, to wrestle with God until we give God a black eye? No, far from it! This unjust judge is everything that God is not. Perhaps it takes a negative comparison in order for us to truly understand and fully appreciate who God is.

Whereas this judge has no respect for people, God sees us and all that God has created as good. Whereas this heartless judge has no care for those under his care, God loves us to the point of willing to sacrifice the Godself in order to save us. Whereas this crooked judge revel in unrighteousness, God is holy, and God asks us to be holy, and knowing that we are unable, God justifies us in faith through Christ. Whereas this totally annoyed judge who just want to get rid of this annoying widow, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Spirit of God still dwells within us.

If this unjust judge is willing to grant justice out of self-interest and self-preservation, wouldn't our God be much more willing to grant us justice, because the innate nature of God who is good, is love, is holy, and is all powerful? Of course God would.

Yet, for those of us who practice prayer persistently and not give up, we are undoubtably familiar with the reality that not all our prayers are answered, and not all of them are answered in the way we hope. We are conditioned to examine the content of our prayers, we are taught to pray first for the Kingdom of God. Yet for all those who practice persistent and righteous prayers, we cannot escape the fact that sometimes, and some would lament that most times, God remains silent. This silence of God is well documented in the Book of Psalms, where psalmists repeatedly ask: *"How long, Lord, how long?"* in Psalm 13, 74, 79 and 90, or *"Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?"* in Psalm 44, or *"Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"* in Psalm 10.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson rightly points out, in his book “Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers”, that *“We have learned by experience that God’s silence in the face of our prayer is not due to some inadequacy on our part, some technical glitch in the way we pray that can be fixed if we can just get our hands on the right prayer manual. God’s silence is a common and repeated experience among all who pray.”*

In face of such silence, particularly when injustice runs rampant, some get impatient and turn to advocacy for social justice, some turn to revolution, a sort of justice by one’s own hand. In face of the silence of God, some give up praying altogether as if prayer and justice is an either-or proposition. If this parable of the widow and the unjust judge teaches us anything at all, it is that prayer and justice are two sides of the same coin, they are indispensable to one another. Prayer builds our relationship with God, justice is realized in the Kingdom of God. When we learn to persistently pray for the Kingdom, God will take care of everything thing else. *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* (Matthew 6:33)

I have long learned to wait upon God. I have learned it the hard way when I thought I was being persistent in my petition, replacing the will of God with that of my own, not leaving to it to God to do what is best. And when I finally obtained what long asked for, it turned out not to be as I had hoped. I have long learned to wait upon God in prayer.

I will leave you with the words of Evagrius Ponticus, also know as Evagrius the Solitary, one of the better known Desert Fathers of the early church, *“Do not be distressed if you do not at once receive from God what you ask. He wishes to give you something better—to make you preserve in your prayer. For what is better than to enjoy the love of God and to be in communion with Him?”*

What is better than to enjoy the love of God and to be in communion with God? Perhaps in the act of prayer, in the mindset of persistent in prayer, we have already received from God the best.

Jesus concludes his parable with an open ended question, *“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find such faith on earth?”* The answer is in your praying hand.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.