

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/20/2019 Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

This morning we have another one of those deceptively simple parables from Jesus. It might sound like Jesus is saying, "Just pray all the time and God will finally give in and give you what you want." Does that sound right?

When you pray hard enough, long enough, persistently enough—when you, in the words, of this parable, cry to the Lord day and night: does it all work out?

Of course not. Prayer does not depend on your effort.

So is prayer important?

Why do we seek healing prayers on this third Sunday?

Why do we pray for the people on our prayer list?

What is prayer good for? Do Episcopalians care about prayer?

Prayer is central to Episcopalians. Back in Reformation days, when Queen Elizabeth came along, we agreed to pray the same way but allow for some divergence in belief.

But petition is only one way of praying. If we link persistence in prayer to getting what we want, we're not approaching prayer in an Episcopal way.

We can tell from our Bible that widows in biblical times had it rough, which is why Scripture advocated for them. God's people were commanded to care for widows and orphans. Some widows are presented very favorably, such as Ruth and Naomi. They were widows, and they persevered—at first just Ruth, but eventually Ruth persuaded her mother-in-law and fellow widow to be persistent as well. That's one story in the Bible with a simple, happy ending. Another widow presented well in the Bible is the widow who cared for the prophet Elijah.

The widow in Jesus' parable was seeking justice. The judge refused to grant it, and we read that he didn't fear God and didn't respect anyone. The unjust judge is not God. Those are not godly attributes. But the widow's persistence eventually leads to justice.

Justice is the key part to this. Persistence by itself is a good discipline, but divorced from Christianity, from justice, it loses some meaning. Sure, we need to be persistent. I am pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in writing, which means I have to relentlessly submit my finely polished pieces to various places, and subject myself to constant rejection. There's a widely circulated article among writers like me that we should aim for 100 rejections a year, because if we reach that many, then we will have some acceptances, too. Personally, I was rejected fifty times before placing my first essay a couple years ago. Fifty times. I was mostly okay with the first twenty-five, but then I thought, for twenty-six through fifty, *this is too hard. I hate this. I'm terrible writer. This has been a horrible use of money and time and the church's time.* Then when 51 was an acceptance, reading the piece online was sweet. Persistence was key. But every rejection still hurts. Persistence is key for sales, too. "Every no gets you closer to a yes."

So persistence might get you published or help you sell something, but that doesn't make it a Christian value. That makes it a good thing that you might read about in a magazine. But when we gather here on Sundays, we are reading the Bible. Holy Scripture. Our Timothy reading this morning reminded us that all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. So, how do we take this parable and carry out that message to Timothy?

Jesus didn't come to earth to tell us how to make sales. Jesus came to save us. To help us draw closer to God. To teach us how to pray. Prayer is especially highlighted in the Gospel we are reading this year, Luke.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells this parable about the judge and the widow as he and his disciples are traveling to Jerusalem. Jesus just spoke about how before the end of the world comes, people will become impatient. We want justice and we want it *now*, right? And when that doesn't happen, we can lose heart. When the world around us seems to be falling apart, we can lose heart. When our personal world seems to fall apart, we can lose heart. The Bible exhorts us again and again not to lose heart.

This is a time in our church family when we might be tempted to lose heart. Some of us are facing difficult diagnoses. The lead volunteer for our youth program for almost twenty years is suffering in the hospital following a stroke three weeks ago. John Tipton, who has many family members and loved ones in our congregation, died recently, and we will have his funeral Saturday. Another member who had returned to church after years away lost his wife last year and then, when on a trip to Germany, had a stroke.

I've been having trouble not losing heart lately.

But when we are part of a loving Christian community, we become family, and there are a lot of us, and we are human, and we have to endure difficult, heartbreaking times. We share one another's sorrows. We pray for each other, fervently. We pray for things to be different. Better. And we want them to be better now. And Jesus does not want us to lose heart when they don't get better right away.

We have so many names on our prayer list right now: parishioners, friends, family members of parishioners. Loved ones who are in the military and deployed. Intercessions for them are one way that we persistently pray. Petitions for ourselves are another way we pray.

Today is the third Sunday of the month, so seek healing. We pray our litany of healing, and we come up to the rail so that someone can lay hands on us and anoint us with oil. Last week, we talked about thanksgiving, gratitude: another important, crucial way to pray. Another way to pray is praise. Adoration.

We need persistence in all of these methods of prayer. This does not mean that everything will have the outcome for which we hope, but as Christians, we do hope.

Our readings from the book of Jeremiah are coming to an end today. In the coming weeks, as we wrap up our year of reading from the prophets, we will hear from Joel, from Habbakuk, Isaiah. Today, we hear from what's called the book of consolation at the end in Jeremiah. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will watch over them to build and to plant. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me.

This book of Jeremiah that has had so much warning and craziness and danger and desolation ends in hope. Last Sunday, the exiles were told to seek the welfare of the place in which they found themselves, Babylon. They are to go on with their lives, but they are not to lose heart. They are to persist in hope.

The widow sought justice, and God was on her side. She wore down the judge. The judge is not God, but represents the unjust systems in the world. With our persistence and prayer, we can hope that all will be different. We can pray and not lose heart.