

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

When Prayer Remains Unanswered

Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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If I am being honest with you, which I always endeavor to be, I don't know too many people who love this parable. Its message is complicated.

I wonder if any of you can relate to this. I will not ask for a show of hands. But growing up, my brother and I learned that sometimes, not all the time, but some wonderfully magical times, we could wear our parents down. There is nothing quite like the repetitive request, right? Now, my brother and I were — are — pretty different people. He is more of an immediate gratification sort of guy. So he, for example, would ask for a cookie. And if the answer was no, he'd wait a few minutes, and ask again. And if the answer remained no, he'd wait a few more minutes, or sometimes he'd get real cheeky, and just keep asking in a continuous stream of hopefulness, "CanIhaveacookiecanIhaveacookiecanIhaveacookie?" As you might imagine, my parents loved this with every fiber of their being.

My approach was different. I didn't waste time on cookies. I went for the big ticket items, like when I wanted a dog. I asked, of course, and when initially told no, I didn't ask again. I did, however, launch a full-scale campaign throughout the house. My dad would pick up his toothbrush, and there would be a post it note wrapped around it: Can we get a dog? My mom would pull the milk out of the refrigerator to find it had been covered in big black letters: Can we get a dog? They would go for a walk, and come back to find the front door covered in construction paper letters: We need a dog. This went on for some time.

My parents watch worship each week, so I need to tread carefully here. All I'm going to say is this: my brother got a lot of cookies. And we got a dog.

Stories like that, though, are actually part of what makes Jesus' story so tricky. It seems to be saying, if you are willing to wear God down with annoying behavior, you'll get what you want. And even more problematic is that it also seems to be saying, God will give you what you want just so you will leave God alone, because oh my gosh, is God sick and tired of hearing from you. Those interpretations are not helpful. But if I understand the text, neither are they faithful.

This story is one of Jesus' many parables — stories Jesus tells in order to teach a lesson or make a point. It's excellent pedagogy, but it's also frustrating, because the way he crafts these stories, with layers and metaphors and carefully chosen language, we're never certain we understand exactly what he means. Some scholars have even gone so far as to say as soon as you believe you've understood everything about a parable, you might as well go back to the beginning, because that foolish kind of thought likely means you've missed the point — or at least a point — entirely.

This parable, though, and the way it is recorded, is different. Before the story even begins, we're told what's it's about. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Apparently, the lesson bound up within this parable is so essential, Jesus is leaving no room for interpretation (or misinterpretation). "Here's what it's about," he says. Now, the lessons in the other parables seem awfully important, too: lessons about loving our neighbors, and showing grace and mercy to one another, and trusting in new life, and in receiving and extending forgiveness. But we're left to puzzle over those meanings

on our own. Among all those options, is a parable about prayer really the one we absolutely cannot risk getting wrong?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells this story right after he tells a scary story about the end of the age. "On that night," he says, "there will be two in bed, and one will be taken while the other is left. And there will be two people in the kitchen together, and one will be taken while the other is left." In the very next breath, he tells us this story about prayer — which gives us a clue, I think, about what kind of prayer he's talking about. He's not talking about requests for cookies or dogs. He's talking about urgent prayer. Prayer that asks God to come, and come soon. Prayer that begs for God's presence, God's justice, God's compassion, not later, but right now. And if you have ever prayed a prayer like that, you know it can wear your heart right out, especially if there is no sign that God has heard you, never mind any sign that God has answered you. You can only knock on a closed door so long before your hands hurt too much to continue. And you can only speak into the silence for so long before it starts to feel like no one is there. That is when your heart starts to sink so low, it feels like it might fall right out of your body, or that is when your heart feels so cracked, you know it's on the cusp of shattering into a million pieces. "Do not lose heart," Jesus says. Jesus tells us what this parable means not because it matters more than the others, but because he knows how often we're going to need the reminder.

"Don't lose heart," he says. "I know everything is awful right now. I know you can barely stand to take another breath. I know you are scared out of your mind. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Pray. Pray not because I can give you the answer you want, but pray because what I can give you is myself. What I can give you, is enough of my heart to help hold yours in place. Enough of my heart to help hold yours together. Pray not because it's going to change a particular outcome, pray because it's the best way for you to feel connected to me, and I know how much you need that right now." In those moments, Jesus tells us, pray like a widow.

The widow says she is seeking justice against her accuser. Those hearing Jesus' story for the first time would have known that the "justice" she's asking for probably concerned her deceased husband's estate. Under Jewish law, she could not inherit it. It would go straight to her sons or brother-in-law, but she would be allowed to live off of it, unless someone was trying to cheat her out of it. Which means she's not asking for anything extravagant. She's asking for what she needs to survive. She's asking for what it will take for her to make it through another day. She's asking, and she just keeps asking, like someone who knows, or someone who is foolish enough to believe, that eventually, a response will come. "Listen to what the judge says," Jesus tells his disciples. "If you, too, cry out both night and day, God will not delay in helping you."

Back in 2017, I said goodbye to my friend Steve. That goodbye came only five weeks after he started to feel sick, five weeks after he was diagnosed with angiosarcoma. It's a cancer that is as aggressive as it is rare, and it was a situation that seemed as unfair as they come. Steve was a Presbyterian pastor. We were the same age. He was married to Elizabeth, his wife, who he first asked out when they were 15 years old. Four young children completed their family.

Despite the prayers of many, including hundreds of other Presbyterian pastors, which is to say, a whole bunch of professional pray-ers, his condition worsened, rapidly and painfully. During one of my prayers for my friend, I informed God, "Sometimes you make really bad choices," even though not one part of me believed then or believes now that God chose for Steve, or anyone else for that matter, to get sick and suffer. Elizabeth admitted that her prayers started in the same place. But over time, she said, as she continued to pray for her beloved, her prayers began to shift.

"We need a miracle" became "We need pain management." "Please, no intubation" became "Please, make it possible for just a few last words." "Give us as much time as possible" became "Grant him a quick conclusion." "Let us keep him here with us" became "Let him go home to you."

On February 13, 2017, death reared its ugly head. Already confused and intermittently unconscious, Steve never forgot what mattered most. In their last exchange, Elizabeth asked him a question he had asked others hundreds of times over: "To whom do you belong?" And despite everything happening in his body and in his mind, Steve managed to say, "I belong to God." Finding herself in that moment was not the answer Elizabeth had wanted, not at all. But it was the answer she needed: the knowledge that Steve knew he was going to be okay.

Elizabeth knew what the widow in Jesus' story knew — that sometimes, the most important time to pray is actually when your prayers seem to be the most meaningless. It would be easier to do otherwise, of course. Asking for something means the risk of not receiving it. Seeking something means the risk of not finding it. It would be easier not to ask. Not to seek. Not to pray. But praying when we are most vulnerable is the best way I know of drawing ourselves right up alongside God, close enough for God to see the tears in our eyes, which means close enough for us to see the love in God's eyes.

And I believe that is the moment when prayer changes us. And when prayer doesn't change the circumstances around us, prayer changing *us* allows us to carry on. "Do not lose heart," Jesus says. "I know there will be a millions reasons you might. I know the world is harder than anyone wants it to be. I know every breath seems more difficult than the last. But pray anyway. Prayer isn't what keeps me connected to you. nothing could ever disconnect us. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Prayer isn't what keeps me connected to you, but it is what helps you *remember* we're connected. Prayer is how you will be reminded that I am here, even when you have every reason to forget. And if you start to lose your heart," Jesus says, "I will give you mine. And when I give you my heart, you will have everything you need. Not everything you want, I know, but everything you need."

George Buttrick, one of my predecessors at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, in the final decade of his life, after serving as a long-time pastor, after teaching hundreds, if not thousands, of seminarians about preaching and praying — in the final years of his life, he said he had become convinced more than ever before that "prayer broods over our modern disorder as the Spirit once brooded over the void," and that every time it does, it "summons forth a new world." May it be so.