

## *Building a Life of Prayer*

Last Sunday after Epiphany – February 22, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passage (NRSV)*

*Luke 18:1-8*

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

*James 5:13-16*

<sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

*This week, we conclude our six-week series on prayer: A Life of Prayer. Today, we consider what it means to build a life of prayer and how we can go about it.*

*The judge and the persistent widow*

Even if we’ve been taught to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. We might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it’s not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? Earlier in this series, we reminded ourselves that, of course, God answers prayers; a loving father would do no less. Still, it is not always easy to persist. Our passage from Luke is one of Jesus’ parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish sin as it deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In the end, the judge was to render a just verdict that

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) was a humble German shoemaker whose writings influenced Christians across Europe. Seeking to live a life of prayer, Boehme composed a set of simple, direct prayers to be used through the day. There is something to learn here about a life of ‘unceasing’ prayer.

‘On Waking’

Living Lord, you have watched over me and put your hand on my head during the long, dark hours of night. Your holy angels have protected me from all harm and pain. To you, Lord, I owe life itself. Continue to watch over me and bless me during the hours of the day.

‘On Rising’

Rule over me this day, O God, leading me on the path of righteousness. Put your Word in my mind and your Truth in my heart, that this day I neither think nor feel anything except what is good and honest. Protect me from all lies and falsehood, helping me to discern deception wherever I meet it. Let my eyes look straight ahead on the road you wish me to tread, that I might not be tempted by any distraction. And make my eyes pure, that no false desire may be awakened within me.

‘On Dressing’

Merciful God, you clothed your Word with the pure and perfect body of our Lord Jesus. Clothe my soul with that same purity, that I may share his perfection . . . Dear God, destroy my sins, and so make me ready to put on the cloak of eternal life.

vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God,

more daily prayers from Jacob Boehme

'On Going to Work'

Give me, dear Lord, a pure heart and a wise mind, that I may carry out my work according to your will. Save me from all false desires, from pride, greed, envy and anger, and let me accept joyfully every task you set before me. . . . Above all, remind me constantly that I have nothing except what you give me, and can do nothing except what you enable me to do.

'At Noon'

O God, source of eternal light, you provide temporal light for all the earth . . . The warmth and brightness of the sun makes the flowers bloom and the crops grow. . . . And may your eternal light shine in the darkest corners of my soul. . .

'At Evening'

I thank you, O God, for your care and protection this day, keeping me from physical harm and spiritual corruption . . . Let my mind, which through the day has been directed to my work, through the evening be wholly directed to you.

'At Bed-time'

As I take off my dirty, dusty clothes, let me also be stripped of the sins I have committed this day . . . Now I come before you, naked in body and care in soul, to be washed clean. Let me rest tonight in your arms, and so may the dreams that pass through my mind be holy. And let me awake tomorrow, strong and eager to serve you.

our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayer of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our confidence that God loves us.

*James*

The book of James was written by Jesus' half-brother, who was not a follower of Jesus until after Jesus' death and resurrection. James went on to be the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem. Perhaps because he was Jesus' brother, James' letter sounds much like we might imagine Jesus would sound. James gives straightforward, practical instruction on what it truly means to be a disciple, hearing and doing the word of God.

Toward the end of his letter, James turns to prayer that is embedded deeply into the lives of his fellow Christians. Are you suffering? *Pray*. Are you cheerful? *Pray*. Are you sick? *Pray*. Have you sinned? *Pray*. All of this is part of community life. The sick are to "summon" (yes, a strong word) the leaders. All are to gather to pray over the sick. They are to anoint with oil.<sup>2</sup> Any discomforts they might have with the sick (or with hospital rooms!) are to be set aside. Prayers to heal the sick and prayers to heal sinners are all woven together. For James, there is simply no place in the Christian community for isolation and loneliness. To use Dallas Willard's phrase, we are to be "a community of prayerful love."

In all this, we are to grasp that building a life of prayer is far more than carving out a few minutes each day to say a prayer. Rather, it is living a life in unceasing, persistent conversation with God.

<sup>1</sup>In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge!) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.

<sup>2</sup>Anointing the sick with oil was a common medicinal practice in ancient cultures. Because oil was used to anoint (consecrate) kings and priests in Israel, James may mean for us to connect the medicinal power of the oil with a symbolic handing over of the illness to God, thus holding together the spiritual and the physical.

## Daily Bible Readings

(more passages on prayer)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 18:9-14 Another of Jesus' parables about prayer</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 11:1-4 The Lord's Prayer in Luke's gospel</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 11:5-13 Another parable about persistence in prayer</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 22:39-46 Luke's story of Jesus' prayer on the eve of his death – note the drama of Jesus' anguished prayer.</p>
<p>Day 5 John 17 Jesus prays for his disciples</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### *Building the Kingdom*

#### **A New Sermon Series Begins Next Week!**

In the studies for this six-week series, we'll be looking at the kingdom of God. What do we mean by it? Where is it? What are our roles in God's kingdom? What does the kingdom mean for St. Andrew and our future? We've built a beautiful new sanctuary for which we must finish paying, but what lies ahead? How can we ensure that we look outward to the needs of others, rather than only inward to our own? Study titles include *Building the Kingdom*, *Building a People*, *Building with Purpose*, *Building for Possibilities*, *Building with Prayer*, and *Opening the Kingdom*.

**Please Join Us!!**

#### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I admit that I was a little amused when I came across the prayers of Jacob Boehme (see the text boxes in the study). A prayer for getting dressed?! But as I read and prayed Jacob's prayers, I began to appreciate his faith and his wisdom. Most of us probably don't use set prayers, that is, prayers written by others. What would be the value of using prayers like those of Jacob Boehme? How might they help us to build a life of prayer? How can they help us to understand better our own hearts?
2. In the parable of the judge and the widow, Jesus could certainly have used a different character than a widow. The fact that he uses a widow draws our attention to God's compassion for the powerless and poor. In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper asks, "How does such a God hear our prayers if they are self-centered, concerned only with petty issues, or irrelevant to God's redemptive purposes? . . . To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger but do not, the call to pray night and day is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives." Discuss how prayer could change or has changed your priorities.

As we seek to build lives of prayer, we must be open to the possibility (the promise!) that our prayers will change our priorities and our entire orientation to life. I guess I should know that a conversation with God could do no less.