

SERMON “PRAY PERSISTENTLY—NEVER GIVE UP”

(Luke 18:1-8 Preached at MPC on October 16th, 2016)

One of my favorite stories about Mother Teresa occurred shortly before her death in September of 1997—Mother planned a visit to the office of super-lawyer Edward Bennett Williams. Her purpose was to enlist Williams' assistance in building a hospice for AIDS patients. Williams had learned the purpose of Mother Teresa's visit beforehand. He confided to his friend, Paul Dietrich, that AIDS was not his favorite charity. They then worked on a polite refusal, which Williams practiced before Mother Teresa's arrival.

When Mother Teresa arrived, she made her proposal. Williams very nicely but very firmly said that he was sorry but he could not help. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray," and bowed her head. Williams rolled his eyes, but he bowed his head. Mother Teresa prayed. After her prayer, Mother Teresa once again asked Williams for money to build the AIDS hospice. She made exactly the same appeal that she had made before her prayer. Williams again politely but firmly told her that he was sorry but he couldn't help. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams rolled his eyes again, but what was he going to do! He bowed his head again as Mother Teresa prayed.

Williams saw the handwriting on the wall. Mother Teresa had him trapped in his own office. Finally, when she ended her prayer, Williams said, "All right! All right!" and pledged his support to her cause. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells a story rather like that. A widow came to a judge, asking for justice. The problem was that this was a wicked judge who cared nothing about God or anyone else. His only concern was his own welfare. The rich and powerful could count on a full hearing in his court. All else need not apply.

The widow was the opposite of rich and powerful. When her husband had died, she had lost her income and her property. She had nothing and, as far as everyone was concerned, she was nothing. She could not expect any help from the wicked judge, but she expected it anyway. She demanded justice day after day, and would not take "no" for an answer. Finally, the wicked judge said: "Though I neither fear God, nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will defend her, or else she will wear me out by her continual coming." In other words, "I'll do whatever it takes to get this woman off my back."

Jesus said, "Won't God avenge his chosen ones, who are crying out to him day and night?" (v. 7). In other words, "If a wicked judge will grant justice to those who ask, won't our loving Father do the same?" Have you ever prayed and despaired of an answer? Have you ever gone through tough times that seemed that they would never end? Have you ever felt that you were at the end of your rope? Have you ever wondered if God truly cares?

If so, this parable is for you! It's a parable of promise! It promises that God is there! It promises that God cares! It promises that God answers prayer! It promises that God will vindicate the person who continues to pray through the tough times—the person who continues to hope—the person who clings to faith.

I must admit that looking within that context of that promise, there are problems. God does not answer every prayer as we ask. God does not answer prayer according to our timetable. Christians, in this life, suffer just like everyone else. Sometimes the good guys appear to be losing and sometimes the bad guys appear to be winning.

But there is something else at work here too. God does not always give us what we want when we want it. God allows us to suffer—sometimes terribly. Mother herself suffered for over 40 years enduring a spiritual condition call “dark night of the soul.” During that period of her ministry Mother Teresa wrote that she lived in a spiritual desert, panicked that God had rejected her, or worse, that he was there in the dark hiding from her.

And as if by some strange formula, the greater her success and public adulation, the more abandoned, humiliated, and desperate she felt. But God promised to be with Mother and with us every step of the way—And yes God walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death as He did with Mother Teresa.

The story is told of a not so very-successful salesman who asked a successful salesman the secret of his success. The successful salesman said, "There's no great secret. You just have to keep jumping at every opportunity that comes along." The first salesman said, "But how do you know when an opportunity is coming?" The successful salesman responded, "You don't! You just have to keep jumping!"

Our parable tells us that there's a spiritual truth here. We cannot predict the moment that God will bless us. We cannot predict the moment that God will vindicate us. But,

as we keep praying, we keep the channel of blessing open, ready to receive God's blessings. This parable of the widow and the wicked judge is Jesus' promise that, if we keep the channel open, if we keep persisting, God will use it to bless us—not always as we want—not always as we ask—but better than we could ever imagine.

But, while prayer would seem to be the easiest of disciplines, it often comes hard for us.

Martin Luther once noticed his dog sitting near the table, watching Luther eat. The dog sat there motionless with unblinking eyes, watching Luther move food from his plate to his mouth. Reflecting on the dog's persistent gaze, Luther said: "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope." Don't you wish that you could pray like Luther's dog watching the meat! Don't you wish you could pray with that kind of intensity! Don't you wish you could rattle heaven's gates and awaken God to hear your cries of distress!

If we can have faith in a politician—or a coach—a preacher—or a teacher—or our spouse—we can certainly have faith in the God who gave us life—and who made it possible for us to awaken this morning to a new day. If we can pay rapt attention to a sunrise or a sunset, let us be a people of persistent prayer so that we might become a people of perpetual blessing!

The organ in a large church broke down one Sunday morning just before services were to begin. A member of the congregation happened to be an organ repairman and he immediately went to work on the instrument – finding it was a simple electrical problem. When he finally got it fixed it was just about the middle of the sermon. He quietly passed a note to the organist which read: "After the pastor's prayer - the power will be on."

There's a supposedly true story of a Welsh woman who lived in a remote valley in Wales. She went to a great deal of trouble and expense to have electrical power installed in her home. However, after a couple of months, the electric company noticed she didn't seem to use very much electricity at all. Thinking there might be a problem with the hookup, they sent a meter reader out to check on the matter. The man came to the door and said, "We've just checked your meter and it doesn't seem that you're using much electricity. Is there a problem?" "Oh no" she said. "We're quite satisfied. We turn on the electric lights every night to see how to light our lamps and then we switch them off again."

Now what's the application to this story? Now, why didn't this woman make more use of her electricity? She believed in electricity. She believed the promises of the electric company when they told her about it. She went to a great deal of trouble and expense to have her house wired for it—BUT—she didn't understand the potential of electricity in her home—AND SO, she used its power sparingly

I suspect there are many Christians who use prayer very much the same way. They believe in prayer. They know of the promises God has made. They've even read and heard stories about answered prayers. BUT they use prayer's power sparingly— I believe that's the reason that many don't understand how prayer works. AND many people believe it doesn't really matter whether they pray or not. They either believe: God's gonna do, what God's gonna do anyway – so why bother!?! OR – they regard prayer as a last resort after all of their other efforts have failed. It's Sort of like “Hail Mary” pass in football. They throw it up in the air and hope it reaches the desired destination. They'll pray a little bit. They'll throw up occasional appeal— But in their heart of hearts, they don't view prayer as making that big an impact on the decisions they make every day.

(pause...) Daniel the prophet didn't pray that way. Daniel prayed persistently 3 times every day. He prayed in his room. He prayed in the lions' den. He prayed for wisdom. He prayed for guidance. He prayed persistently that God would forgive the sins of His people Israel and return them to their home. We find Daniel still struggling in prayer for 21 days because he's troubled by a dream he's had. Many Christians would have trouble praying persistently for 21 days for anything.

We get impatient with God and we pray like the 3-year-old boy that Paul Harvey, the radio announcer, tells us about. His mother took the boy to the grocery store and before they entered the store she said to him, "Now you're not going to get any chocolate chip cookies, so don't even ask." So she put him up in the cart & he sat in the little child's seat while she wheeled down the aisles. He was doing just fine until they came to the cookie section. He saw the chocolate chip cookies & he stood up in the seat & said, “Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?” She said, “I told you not even to ask. You're not going to get any at all.” So he sat back down. They continued down the aisles, but in their search for certain items they ended up back in the cookie aisle. “Mom, can I please have some chocolate chip cookies?” She said, “I told you that you can't have any.

Now sit down & be quiet.”

Finally, they were approaching the checkout lane. The little boy sensed that this may be his last chance. So just before they got to the line, he stood up on the seat of the cart & shouted in his loudest voice, “In the name of Jesus, may I please have some chocolate chip cookies?” And everybody round about just laughed. Some even applauded. And due to boy’s persistence and the generosity of the other shoppers, the little boy & his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies. We ought always to pray and not give up...

Jesus teaches us through our story today with the widow and wicked judge, through Mother’s and the boy’s persistence that we should “always pray and not give up.” Not because God is hard of hearing. Not because God needs to be pestered into answering our requests. Not because God doesn’t want to answer us NO... Jesus taught and teaches us always to pray and not give up because when we pray, our prayers carry weight. EVERY TIME you and I pray we unleash more and more power from the throne of God.

Friends are you praying for someone in your family to become a Christian? Every prayer you pray puts more and more pressure on that person to listen to God. Do you pray for your friends in their daily struggles? Every prayer you pray imparts to them more and more power from God. Do you have difficulties with someone at work? Every prayer you lift up to God’s throne brings God’s power to bear on difficult people and situations.

Prayer is not a passive act on our part. Prayer is an **AGGRESSIVE, ACTIVE, MINISTRY!** You are putting your shoulder to the wheel and moving the forces of heaven. One man describing his prayers said “When I pray – I PUSH! When everything seems to go wrong, I just Push! When the job gets me down, I just Push! When people don’t react the way I think they should, I just Push! When my money looks funny and the bills are due, I just Push! When I want to curse and get impatient with people for whatever the reason, I just Push! When people just don’t understand me, I just Push! PUSH by the way stands for P-ray!!! U-ntil!!! S-omething!!! H-appens!!!

As we pray this week for those on our prayer list, for our pre-school, for new elders and deacons to step forward, for a CE director, for the outreach of our Alpha Class, for stewardship season coming up, for our youth and children, for a host of many things at MPC, don’t just pray on something once or twice. Pray persistently, never give up!

PUSH your prayers again and again and again! When we do that we empower the angels of God and unleash the power of heaven! Amen! Let us pray!