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Luke 18:1-8  
The Conundrum of Prayer

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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘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.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

A ventilator hums in the background, feeding air into the lungs of a 3 day old baby boy. Monitors hang overhead with quick flashing wavelengths pulsating across the screen. Bags of fluid hang from medicine poles around the tiny crib. The room beeps and hums… and is incredibly still. We are in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at Children’s Medical Center Dallas. The parents of this three day old have glassy eyes

“I feel like God has forgotten about us down here, “ the mother exclaims. “I am pretty angry at God. We are still praying for a miracle but it feels like God cannot hear us.” Weaving our fingers and hands around the tubes in order to find an area of skin to touch his body, we pray together around the tiny crib. We pray for this baby to have life restored. Eighteen days later, the baby exhales for the last time in his father’s arms.

In the adjoining room, a ventilator hums and monitors hang overhead. The toddler in the crib begins to move and attempts to open her eyes. She reaches for the tubes in an effort to tear them away from her. A week ago, this baby received a new heart – a transplant – what the parents call “an answered prayer” and what the medical staff call “a miracle.” The family is pensively celebrating, grateful to everyone around them and hopeful. Three weeks later, after many therapies and medicines, the toddler is again toddling around, coming into the heart center clinic for bi-weekly checkups.

One family asks for prayer, prays faithfully, continuously and their son dies.

One family asks for prayer, prays faithfully, continuously and their daughter walks out of the hospital.

Why pray? If prayer seems so inconsequential, then why do it?

In the original language of our written Scripture, prayer is the word “proseuchomai.” In Greek, the prefix “pros” can be defined as “moving toward” or “exchanging with” and “euchomai” is defined as a “desire or wish.” So, together the word “proseuchomai” can mean “to move toward a desire” or “to exchange a wish.” Prayer then, in this sense, means to interact with God, to move toward God, and to exchange a wish with God. Perhaps it means to exchange our human desires with God’s desires.

We see this clearly in the way Jesus prayed.

Jesus, when he was teaching the disciples about prayer, he says, “When you pray, say…

Father, who art in heaven.

Hallowed by thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This prayer, known as the Lord’s Prayer is certainly communication with God. It is an exchange between people and God. It is an exchange of desires.

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses.”

Those are desires of mine – for daily bread and forgiveness. Those are two things I need.

In this particular exchange though, Jesus is clear that “God’s will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.”

Is it my will for daily bread – or God’s will that I have it?

Is it my will for forgiveness – or God’s graceful will?

Another example of Jesus manner of prayer is in the garden of Gethsemane – after his final supper with the disciples and prior to his arrest and crucifixion. He prays, “My father, if it’s possible, take this cup of suffering from me. However – not what I will but what you will.”

Jesus moves toward the Creator by exchanging his desires with God.

Going further that same night, Jesus prays, “If it is not possible that this cup be taken away from me unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Jesus communicates with God in an exchange that includes exchanging his desire (that the cup be taken from him) with God’s will (that he drink from that very cup).

In no way do I want to suggest that God’s will includes death, cups of suffering and destruction. And in no way do I want to suggest that God allows suffering and terror so that we might learn something. What I do believe is that, in the midst of terrible tragedy, God is with us, creating something good. It is not only God creating, but we are given creative energy as well. We can raise babies, grow plants for food, feed one another and reimagine God’s love in our love for others. And with this creative energy comes great risk. We can also use our creative energy to deconstruct, to create more for ourselves and less for others and to harm our own relationship with the Creator – the Creator that gives us creative energy – the Creator who gives us power to choose how we use that creative energy. And because our creative energy comes from God, it is God’s will that we be in communication – that we pray – that we exchange our desires for God’s desires.

The passage of Scripture today is a parable, and unlike other parables where the meaning is left to interpretation, discussion and sometimes to confused disciples, the author explains, “Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged.”

How? And again, why should we pray continuously and not be discouraged?

In the parable, the widow continues to visit the unjust judge requesting, “justice in the case against my adversary.” The unjust judge pushes her away several times.

This widow reminds me of Ralphie in the classic movie “A Christmas Story.” Ralphie wants a Red Ryder BB Gun more than anything in the world. He crafts letters to his teacher, pleads with his mother and even pushes down his pride enough to visit a scary Santa Clause at the department store. Each adult responds to this desire with, “You’ll shoot your eye out.” Ralphie continues to persist. On Christmas morning, after all the presents are unwrapped, Ralphie’s father points to a hidden gift in the corner. When Ralphie unwraps the gift, he finds a new Red Ryder BB gun. The story ends somewhat chaotically, Ralphie almost shoots his eye out, the neighbors dogs eat the Christmas dinner and the family ends up at a Chinese restaurant for a meal on Christmas.

Like Ralphie, the widow finally gets what she has been asking for. The unjust judge gives the widow her request for justice, saying “I will give the widow justice because she keeps bothering me.” The judge doesn’t give justice because he believes in justice or because he cares for the widow. He gives the widow what she desires so that she will leave him alone and not come back. The injustice of the unjust judge lies in the fact that he does not care about the widow or about justice – either in the first, second, tenth or final visit of the widow. Even after the widow has the justice that she requested, the judge is still unjust.

God is not the unjust judge. God is a stark contrast to the unjust judge. God does not simply give us what we desire because we pester and God wants us to go away. In contrast to the unjust judge, God offers justice because God is present and God cares – the first, second, tenth and final time we come to God before we have any sort of answer.

In a CBS interview with Mother Theresa, Dan Rather asked:

“When you pray, what do you say to God?”

Mother Theresa answered, “I don’t say anything. I listen.”

Rather pose the second question, “Well okay, when God speaks to you, what does God say?”

Mother Theresa responded, “God doesn’t say anything. God listens.”

Rather paused, somewhat bewildered.

Mother Theresa added, “And if you don’t understand that – I can’t explain it to you.”

There is a mystery within the conundrum of prayer. One family prays for this and gets the complete opposite. One family prays for that and gets a miracle. Jesus prays for God’s will to be done. And in all of these prayers, God is present, God is listening, God is offering justice to those who might listen.

As the Creator disperses creative energy into the creation, prayer remains the connection point. Prayer helps us to recognize our own creative energy and to discern God’s will in terms of how to use that energy. Prayer connects us to the justice-giver and allows us to be co-creators of justice. We do it continuously, even as we breathe, if we will pay attention to the prayer in our breath.

May you be like Ralphie, may you be like the widow in today’s parable – may you be persistent in prayer. May we be persistent in the exchange of our desires for God’s desires. May we receive God’s grace in allowing us to be holders of creative energy and may you use that creative energy for spreading God’s love and justice.